THESIS PRESENTED FOR THE DEGREE OF PH.D IN COMPRATIVE LITERATURE

TRADITION AND SUBVERSION: GENDER AND POST-COLONIAL FEMINISM, THE CASE OF THE ARAB REGION (WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO ALGERIA)

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To My Mother,

ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the position of women in post-colonial societies across the Arab region and the structuring of female experience and gender by patriarchy, class, literacy, religion and historical conditions such as colonization, neo-imperialism and the rise of capitalism. The male writing of the female body and the perception of the latter as a field of power within the Arabo-Muslim culture constitutes the framework of the thesis. This critical approach also informs the growing feminist scholarship on the subject of the so-called Arab woman in the area under study. The notion of the feminine delivered by male dogmatic discourses, whether old or new, traditional or modern, orthodox or profane, is briefly presented in the first part of the dissertation while the deconstruction of such a referential setting by feminist academic work is undertaken in Part two as an attempt to integrate notions of womanhood, sexuality, identity, culture, religious belief, statehood, and material factors into a discursive order. Sexual difference becomes problematized within the critical assessment of the fictional voices developed by women, their exploration of concepts of sexual behaviour and their analysis of how gender ideology permeates the modernist endeavours of the post-colonial state in its efforts at development.

A significant predicament is highlighted by the thesis: the cultural discourse on women, enduringly linked to their functions within the private realm, copulation and reproduction, as indicated by both the fictional and the scholarly literature, clashes with the developmentalist endeavours which require active roles within the public sphere. The conflict and indeterminacies generated by such a discrepancy are projected as an essential framework for understanding the construction of women as the `subordinate sex` at various levels. It is also read as a fundamental dilemma that post-colonial societies across the Mediterranean have yet to address in order to resolve, at least partly, their present socio-economic crisis. The notion of woman is further essentialized within concepts of difference drawn by other dominant discourses examined in Part three. Perspectives of neo-colonialism emanating from the post-industrial First World become a framework in which to insert the work of feminist academics from North Africa and the Middle East as well as definitions of women, whether in the world at large or in more academic terms.

The furthest concern of the debate on the `women question` is to underline however the significance of feminism to operate as a major socio-political force within the post-colonial world. The findings of this research already indicate that the various movements for female emancipation taking place in the region open up new possibilities of struggle for economic growth, equality and secular democracy.

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CHAPTER ONE

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

This thesis is an attempt to trace the contours and broad framework of feminist criticism which has developed in North Africa and the Middle East in the last two decades, and during the twentieth century more generally. This work is articulated according to a macro-perspective which endeavours to ascertain various critical ways of describing gender across a number of societies and traditions and to theorize the feminine from the viewpoint of academic feminism.

This wide approach, adopted in the three parts of the dissertation, may be justified by the presence of persistent, analogous moralities[1] between all societies in the region under study and the presence of a global

1. It is important to underline that it is Arabo-Islamism which is at issue here. It is the global discursive dimension of such a discourse and its interpretation by both patriarchal and feminist readings which is the focus of the present thesis rather than the many specificities which distinguish the various societies in the Arab areas from each other. These specificities are articulated by a number of structuring conditions which I have to leave outside the main framework of debate. I mention in particular religion since Judaism and Christianity are also present in the area (not to mention other faiths such as Bahaism), ethnicity (Berber, Kurdish and other groups do not identify necessarily with the Arabic component of Arabo-Islamic identity), sexuality as heterosexuality, not lesbianism and homosexuality, becomes the basis of the sexual discourse as it is the locus of the relationship between man and woman as defined by a dominant, traditional orthodoxy.

patriarchy which derives its dominance from common sources, mainly the sacred texts of early Islam as reproduced by old traditions of exegesis and indigenous mores and customs. However, deep divisions and differences exist between all countries of the Arab areas in concrete sociological, material and institutional terms.[2]

So this thesis operates on the principle that there are recurrent, common parameters existing within a geopolitical area labelled (for the sake of convenience) the 'Arab world'[3] and which stem from shared cultural, religious, historical referents. Within this world, despite all the various socio-cultural and political systems across the region, there appear to be certain discursive regularities and recurring formulations and

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2. The specificities of some large scale political developments undergone by the Lebanon and Iraq which have experienced situations of war, of Yemen and the Occupied Territories in the West bank have not been addressed, mainly because of the focus of the thesis on the global situation of women in the area. Although the position of women is affected by specific political events in particular ways, it has not been possible, within the scope of this work, to address concrete cases at hand. But the discussion of common criteria between women in the Arab region can lead to general (but not generalistic) findings.

3. Sometimes, the Arab areas are referred to as North Africa and the Middle East, or as Maghreb and Machrek (Arabic words for Occident and Orient). Alternatively, the term 'Middle East' often encompasses all Arab countries, in addition to Iran and Turkey. Expressions describing North America and Western Europe as 'West' and the traditional 'Orient' (or 'Arab world') as 'East' are relative terms, used speculatively, by virtue of their problematization by Edward Said, mainly in Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient (London: Penguin Books, 1991). This also applies to related qualifiers 'Western', 'Eastern' and the expressions of 'North' and 'South'which respectively refer to the industrialized countries and the developing nations of the Third World.

statements about women at both the ideological and spiritual levels. Such discursive activity is identified therefore as patriarchal and authoritarian. This position can be further reinforced by an Algerian feminist academic, Fatma Oussedik who defines the 'Arab world' as 'a premise in the statements made by the Arab states'[4] and who asks the following question:

> Is one succumbing to a 'mask effect' of ideological discourse if one questions the existence of this area, or does a precise physical area, the basis of an Arab ideology, really exist for the women of the Arab countries?[5]

Her conclusion is that the existence of the entity called 'Arab world' is determined by a shared socio-cultural framework, that of Arabo-Islamism, which entails that ideology alone does not constitute a single definitional parameter.

There is, however, particular emphasis on a post-colonial nation, Algeria, because of its traditions of political struggle in a revolutionary past and a reactionary present. This thesis will draw on the paradoxical experience of this country whose historical development, like that of Egypt, span the era of pan-Arab nationalism and socialism and a more contemporary phase

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4. Fatma Oussedik, 'The Conditions Required for Women to Conduct Research on Women in the Arab Region' in Social Science Research and Women in the Arab World: Unesco Report, ed. by Amal Rassam (London: Frances Pinter, 1984), p. 113.

5. Oussedik, 'To Conduct Research on Women', p. 113. There is a further discussion of the present theme in chapter ten, with regard to the definition of women.

of right-wing fascism and fundamentalism. Although apparently extreme and peculiar, the Algerian case is by no means unusual but reflects more global historical trends undergone by other nations of the Middle east. So, the country has become since 1988, a battlefield for regional socio-political crises and the conflicting forces and ideologies are polarizing within a major and violent counter-revolution. The consequences of these confrontations and the success or failure of the fight for democracy and progress in Algeria may well be determining for the other countries in the area. In addition, the Algerian case helps to provide some vivid illustrations to illumine the theoretical predicaments presented in the thesis and to foresee developments of the 'women question'. The implications of such struggles for women in the whole region and their liberation are paramount.

The thesis begins with a summary review of, firstly, the issue of gender and its structuring through male perspectives, and secondly of feminist thought. These two broad topics are respectively tackled in Part One and Part Two. There is also, in Part Three, an attempt at reviewing the conditions informing the various approaches sought out through critical readings of this literature. In other words, the structural ordering of the present thesis requires i) an exploration of (male) constructions of gender within Arabo-Muslim societies as a preliminary exercise; ii) a review of the scholarly enterprise by women in challenging the premises of this dominant

discourse; and iii) a study of the conditions, local and global, within which these approaches have been articulated, considering both discursive and non-discursive factors.

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The analysis in the first Part aims at reading male discourses as part of a unifying concern: defining the boundaries of sexual identities for both men and women and the fashioning of gender.

The first chapter deals with the cultural delivery of such discourse through a presentation of the work of a Tunisian male scholar, Abdelwahab Bouhdiba.[6] It is specifically devoted to an exploration of the prevailing sexual ideology and its early inception within the model of reality defined by an ecclesiastic order, reinforced by customary values and communal laws. Bouhdiba's archeological work on Islamic sexuality usefully synthesizes fragments of a textual heritage and indirectly uncovers the discursive aspect of socio-cultural and religious discourses on women. It is essential to identify this cultural writing of the female as a traditional process, rooted in the past but entertaining a dialectic relationship with earlier and subsequent periods, constantly reclaiming ties with the present mainly through its revivification in more

6. Abdelwahab Bouhdiba, Sexuality in Islam (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985).

contemporary narratives, epitomized by fundamentalist rhetoric and its obsessive focus on womanhood.

The gendering of individuals by the Arab-Muslim 'frontiers of the sexes'[7] is reinforced, in the case of men, by a fear of the sexually active female as the deadly 'Other'. In any case, there is emphasis, in this chapter (but also elsewhere) on the power of women presented from, on the one hand, an apparently positive viewpoint (the story of the legendary Shahrazad, narrator of the 'Arabian Nights', exemplifies this perspective) and, on the other hand, from a more negative and hostile angle which projects femininity as totally disruptive and transgressive. The latter is illustrated by the character of the ogress or *ghoula* emanating from a tradition of North African folktales. Both images structure the collective unconscious.

Chapter two tackles a more modernist aspect of cultural discourse, concerning Algerian modern history. The exploration of gender roles within a modern and revolutionary framework illustrated by the case of the Algerian revolution offers a critical space where to seek and recapture the voices of old patriarchal traditions. The field of discourse, in this case, is identified as political and modernist, which, because of its revolutionary content, raised positive expectations regarding its prescriptions for women. In other words, it was thought that the radicalism of revolution might

7. This expression is used by Bouhdiba to refer to sexual segregation, p. 37.

help bring about new attitudes towards women, breaking with an autocratic patriarchy. But an investigation of gender roles provides evidence to the contrary and suggests that patriarchy resumed its rights as soon as national order was restored. Although new relations between men and women were effectively encouraged by the new socio-political roles they were called upon to play, the drive to return to the past conceived as a refuge and evocations of its golden preeminence served a male desire to keep women in bondage. This is mainly revealed by the efforts within political discourse to conceive of women mainly in symbolic terms, as bearers of nationalist, communal and family values. In chapter three, this conservative interpretation of womanhood is then shown to extend beyond the political field, by a discursive analysis of a major Maghribi novel Nedjma[8] by the Algerian novelist Kateb Yacine.

This perennial wish to re-align women within the symbolic order and thus to relegate their physical and material meaning to the realm of the unconscious is read as a duplicitous way to resolve the dilemmas posed by a colonial reality which defeats and undermines indigenous maleness; the colonized becomes 'feminised' by a superseding masculine principle, that of the European settler. Gradually, this becomes fundamental in any thinking about gender, power and colonization. It is safe to assume, in the light of such reasoning, that

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8. Yacine Kateb, Nedjma (Paris: Seuil, 1956).

gender is a historical construct and is not, at least in this historical context, determined by sex alone. The colonized male was effectively construed as a feminine subject, hence his own stubborn attempts, within the realm of the material and the symbolic, to conceive of females as even more 'feminine' than they were already in the earlier context of Arabo-Islamism. This is at least one way of understanding the implications of the more contemporary case of religious fundamentalists whose discourse does not invoke gender difference for the sake of patriarchal control alone as it can equally translate into an attempt, by the 'unconscious', to 'feminise' women further while de-sexualizing them by imposing the wearing of the *hejab*. The occasional violence, vocal and physical which it sometimes uses, allows male believers to deploy typically 'virile' attributes and reclaim a space believed to be rightfully theirs, the public sphere. So the focus in this chapter lies on some gender misconceptions that the imposition of aggressive colonial and materialist relations ultimately have had on a society where boundaries between men and women have been so carefully drawn by a dogmatic understanding of Islam, pervaded by a spiritualism dictated by predominant sacred structures in daily life. The latter point does not constitute, by all means, a universal identification nor does it provide the unique channel for self-representation as some Orientalist readings of 'Eastern' cultures tended to establish in a rather unilateral way; they set this interpretation then in opposition to the

materialism of Western culture to justify the dominance or superiority of the latter and its intellectualism. The significance of the Islamic component in the framing of male identity is thus taken into account in this argument. The post-war era reflected the tensions of such a development in the case of men. But the 'new woman' who diverted from these historical images and roles which were ruptured for a while by the revolutionary activism required by the independence movement, becomes an ambiguous female who raises fears and doubts about her loyalty and the relevance of her cultural identity. This argument has further negative repercussions for modern feminist scholars and novelists, accused of turning their backs on Islam and their 'cultural roots'.[9] This in turn has engendered new antagonism on the part of the post-war male who has not yet resolved his own conflicting views towards concepts of womanhood, motherhood, nation and identity.

Chapter four offers a literary exemplification of these arguments, drawing upon both the cultural and the political frames of reference its own parameters of identification. The North African novel Nedjma contextualizes through fiction the insurrectionist and nationalist phase of pre-independence Algeria and reflects the ambiguous processes of the forging of male and female paradigms. In this text, the heroine, Nedjma, first described as an untamed and wild woman, the object

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9. This topic is further debated in the final chapter in section entitled 'Paradoxes of Gender Representations'.

of frustrated desire on the part of the male protagonists, becomes the veiled compliant prisoner of an old patriarch at the closure of the story. The move is understood in feminist terms as a symbolic return of women to their allegedly socio-cultural roles as guardians of the home and tradition and in terms of a resurgent patriarchy. The process then masks or tries to mystify a less esoteric phenomenon, namely that of a Mediterranean machismo as it manifests itself through such misogynist efforts at imprisoning females within the realm of domesticity. Henceforth, it is in relation to women's return or confinement to the home that this journey back to the past is eventually transmitted. Elsewhere, this narrative structure is metaphorically translated as the return to the gynecum and in psycho-analytical terms as an inability to transcend the love of the Mother. This process, socio-cultural, politico-ideological and even psychological, is then poignantly exemplified by the plight of the heroine. The connotations of danger and animalism attached to her stress the process of the 'demonization' of women referred to in chapter six as well as underlining her 'ogress' features. This work is all the more interesting because this author was renowned for his 'iconoclastic' and subversive stand towards the oppressive traditions of his native Algeria and later by his opposition to the establishment, but here, he is read as a patriarchal writer. His novel is a prototypical case which conveys some current assumptions, such as the populist belief

that the reinstatement of patriarchy in the modern age becomes justified by nationalism, anti-imperialism and the need to respect cultural and religious precedents inherited from the past, which, in turn, induces the predominance of Islam. However, the revolutionary component is not discarded altogether since it remains meaningful in the history of struggle undergone by many women in the region. And one should note that the social control of women tends to be less rigid in those countries where political activism, nationalist struggle and constitutional changes constituted significant processes of their modern history. This might explain partly why the patriarchal stronghold in the Gulf states is more resilient than elsewhere in the Arab area.

The critique of the present male fictional endeavour undertaken in Part One has a twofold purpose: on the one hand, to illustrate the patriarchal appropriation and manipulation of female identities through two major fields: one which is culture bound, essentially identified with the past and tradition and another realm which is politically oriented, governed by modernist and somehow radicalist perspectives. On the other hand, it aims at indirectly establishing the transition with the second part of the thesis which also opens out a fictional survey and is equally grounded, similarly to the world of Nedjma, in the modern period.

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The concern of Part Two is to discuss feminist initiatives to date and draw a broad assessment of this post-colonial academic production, both fictional and critical, by major women writers from the area. So, it will be my object in this second part of the thesis to explore the feminist critique of the traditional fashioning of gender roles and of sexual identities and of the feminists' subversion of the patriarchal order as instituted by a theological and ideological orthodoxy.[10]

Feminist academics' reading of such male determined heritage is examined in broad lines with a particular focus on certain thematic devices and symbols. Their concern about the so-called 'Arab woman' is somehow controversial: the term remains a fiction. This justifies to some extent the commonality of the critical discourse adopted in this thesis and the articulation of the polyvalent and diversified feminist arguments into broad approaches, all of which project, for instance, the structuring of the subject-matter in ambivalent and dichotomized movements to explain sexual and social asymmetry. The feminist impact upon three major areas in the development of identity: the fictional, the sexual and the political thus become the fundamental concerns of Part Two.

First, feminist strategies of liberation and subversion and women's voices as they arise in the field

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10. I have used and referred to the English versions of these feminist works whenever the translations were available. On a very few occasions, I have resorted to translating quotes myself.

of literary writing are explored, in broad terms, in Chapter five. In this context, the oral tradition is recovered in this work because of its significance as a privileged mode of discourse which allowed women, especially those who are secluded or live in remote rural areas, to escape a stifling reality, express creativity as well as subvert cleverly the norms of the social order. Oral literature, specifically, is precious for all women because it holds their subterranean memory. It is part of a rich literary polysystem. So much feminist effort is invested in the development of a fictional discourse marked by a deep critical awareness and by a growing feminist consciousness which challenge the preeminence of male authority in society, the passivity assigned to women and the stereotypical portrayal of the female character in fictional works written by men where the image of the exploited and utterly miserable female still prevails. Sexual liberation, rendered by 'freeing' or 'discovering' the body', appears as an important strategy of liberation and an essential structure in the development of such a fiction towards feminism.

A tradition of female subversion is uncovered within women's literary history. It is marked by a tendency on the part of female artists to experiment with new forms of expression. After establishing the grounds upon which the feminist novel arises, there is a need to underline predominant critical categories so far raised by the development of women's modern fiction.

Chapter six takes up the theme of female sexual identity, already exploited by fiction, and examines its meanings in feminist scholarship. Women's sexual behaviour becomes problematized within a woman-centered perspective contingent on a new decoding of sexual desire in relation to both maleness and femaleness. The potential of the feminist challenge resides in its ability to transcend the familiar representations and definitions of femaleness as framed by Arabo-Islamic civilization. It is thus the Islamic ideology of sexuality which is critically investigated by feminist analysis, highlighting the supremacy of the male sexual drive, allegorized and solemnized by the highly erotic notion of the Muslim Paradise, which runs in contrast to Bouhdiba's presentation of a paradise where men and women unite in a single embrace for eternity. The whole critical enterprise by women counteracts the Bouhdibian description of Islamic sexuality. On the other hand, female sexual behaviour is studied in relation to various structures erected into institutions, mainly motherhood and virginity but also the disparagement of emotional bonding between husbands and wives. But feminist analysis does not restrict itself to such study which explains the construction of a subordinate subject in sexual and social terms and equally seeks to discover the covert or overt forms of female rebellion as it sets to disrupt phallogocentrim, whether in its social reality or its discourse. In other words, it seeks the subversive female response, carried over by outstanding females

whose lives go against the grain of Arabo-Islamic society. They discover therefore, beyond texts of order emanating from a religious orthodoxy and a more disruptive old tradition of erotic literature, a powerful subversive response from women. This particular model of femininity is elsewhere embodied by female figures, whether popular and folkloric, mythological or classical. For instance, the 'omnisexual woman' erected by Fatna Sabbah[11] is interpreted as the epitome of woman as sexual ogress and re-inserted in the symbolic order of femininity, one that opens doors into the Arabo-Muslim unconscious. The full impact of this critical perspective becomes apparent within the theoretical distinction brought about between implicit and explicit discourses about sexuality and biology.[12] These are expressed, on one hand, by a concrete notion of women as passive and innocuous and, on the other, by the hidden and often unconscious belief that they are faithless and devious where sexually active. This confirms, in a parallel movement, statements made in chapter two. And, given the concern of this chapter with women's identity, it is important to emphasize that its conceptual lines fall within the private sphere and the world of women. Another characteristic of the present debate on sexuality is its lack of chronological specificity.

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11. Fatna Sabbah, Woman in the Muslim Unconscious (London: Pergamon Press, 1984). Sabbah is a Moroccan scholar who wrote this book under a pen name.

12. Fatima Mernissi, Beyond the Veil: Male and Female Dynamics in Muslim Society (London: Saqi Books, 1985).

The next chapter is more firmly grounded in a post-colonial phase and deals primarily with the sexual politics of the modern state and the political imperative experienced by feminist researchers to address the institutionalized process by which women are estranged or made inferior. However, the relation between women and politics, as it stands now, has been determined by early theological texts on women and their sexuality. It therefore justifies the review of the debate on Islam and its role, active or passive, imaginary or real, in fostering, condoning or undermining the subordination of females. However this review remains inconclusive and to some extent irrelevant to the whole issue of feminism as it is presently trying to grow and develop along secular lines. Nevertheless, the present subordination of women is partly embedded in *shari'a* or Islamic law as it applies to relationships between the sexes, and more modernist endeavours and de-segregationist policies apparently endowed with emancipatory virtues in the case of women. In other words, the feminist debate with reference to the private sphere of sexuality, shifts to another realm, that of the public world, governed by male politics and ideology. The sexual debate has also been male determined but remains inscribed within a traditional context, drawing its meaning and legitimacy from older cultural sources, oral and textual. There is however a general assumption that the post-independence state is necessarily driven by modernist, pro-reformist and egalitarian forces and ideas. The present thesis

sets out to demonstrate the contrary, drawing evidence from a brief review of some feminist texts by women from North Africa and the Middle East. This includes perspectives presented by other Middle Eastern women scholars because there is a coherent political discourse on women, Islam and the state throughout the Southern part of the Mediterranean and the contribution of researchers such as the Turkish academic Deniz Kandiyoti and the Iranian Haleh Afshar are significant contributions in feminist analyses of such narratives on women and in offering alternative strategies of liberation and resistance for all women living in Islamic settings.

So, two fields of the state's interference, a legal one, that of family law, and an economic one, that of development, become the vehicles of these ambivalent treatments of women and antithetical notions of the feminine. Notably, the spread of religious fundamentalism is articulated partly as the effect of the friction between opposing ideologies.

This particular development of the state in relation to women has implications for academic scholarship which tends to reproduce the contradictions and ambiguities of political and social processes. It is the major concern of Part Three to unravel some of these ramifications. At the same time, this debate may be parallelled or juxtaposed, in its main discursive lines, to statements made in Part One about the traditional values embedded in

the cultural sphere which opposed the modernist tendencies of the anti-colonial and revolutionary forces.

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The chapters in Part Three articulate related concerns. Their overall thematic intentions are manifold: to relocate all the ingredients and analytical parameters discussed so far in the thesis within a more wholistic conceptual context bearing in mind the fragmentation of feminist intellectual endeavours in the region under study and draw attention to the problematic aspects of pan-Arab feminist work in terms of theory and methodology. Finally, it may help to delineate, through this intellectual exercise, the areas of intervention and research for future action and reflection. The ultimate concern is thus to determine to what extent academic feminism has been able to transcend or reproduce dominant discourses, namely that of Arabo-Islamism (discussed in Part One) and that of neo-imperialism (referred to throughout the thesis and examined more closely in the last two chapters). In other words, after commenting on the methodology of feminist research, there is a need to address the question as to how feminist thought relates to male discourse, to First World feminism and to academic discourse as a whole.

In addition, a current concern permeates this final section regarding the validation of feminist work and knowledge in the area. Various questions are addressed

throughout the thesis with this aim in mind, including the relevance of using Islam in feminist analysis, the issue of cultural authenticity in relation to concepts of female betrayal and obedience, not to mention the re-location of feminism within the historical developments in this particular region. In the final chapter, the latter, namely the historical origin of feminism, is evoked as part of wider political movements and revolutions experienced by the countries of the South in general during the last two centuries. This challenges the Eurocentrism operating in perceptions and views of these feminisms: that is, their conception as imported ideologies from the ex-colonial and capitalist powers. This validation is also implicitly achieved through feminist strategies and how women develop a gender critique of institutions and current sex roles.

Part Three opens with a review presented in a summary fashion (parallelled by its treatment in the present thesis) of the critical categories of pan-Arab feminism examined within a broad macro-analytical frame. It looks at academic feminism simultaneously as i) a scholarly discipline and a process of thought on issues affecting women and ii) a movement of emancipation offering platforms and forums for women's voices spearheaded by feminist associations such as the Arab Women's Association at the regional level and other women's groups at local levels. However, some specific problems are raised in connection with this process of finding a voice such as difficulties in producing

feminist work from the stand-point of publication, translation, distribution of books and material, censorship and hardship or difficult material conditions.

The following chapters (nine and ten) tackle more endemic predicaments that feminist research is still in the process of identifying and resolving. They address some problematic methodological and epistemological aspects of feminist expertise which sometimes distort its theoretical assumptions and ideas. It appears that one common difficulty faced by women researchers is the issue of the conflict of loyalty they have vis-a-vis their cultures and societies where their work may be interpreted as a subversive enterprise. They feel trapped within discourses about authenticity and loyalty, whether cultural, religious, or political. Some cases of women working 'in the field' are presented to illustrate this particular point which is more broadly referred to in other parts of the thesis as it operates with a certain pervasive influence and force within the lives and careers of most women.

But one fundamental particularity of feminist thought certainly lies in its dichotomization or the split between the modernist and the traditionalist. This tendency to adopt dual paradigms in research tends to generate an overall ambivalence and oppositional effects between available analytical frameworks. It is a tendency of such studies to operate according to a twofold methodological movement, one which seeks in the issue of economic progress and development analytical

elements and settlements for the 'women question' and another which stresses the cultural parameters of their situation. This articulation of research according to Developmentalist and Culturalist inferences is a problematic endeavour mainly because it sees them as somehow unrelated, irreconcilable or even oppositional.

There is emphasis however in the thesis on the idea that the developmentalist structure, part of Social Evolutionary Theory, underwent changes - as indicated in chapters seven and ten - which ranged from conventional conceptions of women's roles in the public sphere to more radical and politicised perspectives. These reject for instance the appropriation of the female body in demographic and political projects, the manipulation of sexuality and the authoritarian attitudes of policy makers towards women as they tend to see their participation as conditional because contingent on somehow liberal or purely materialistic motives. The Culturalist assessment of womanhood is judged to be even more controversial. It is substantially articulated through studies which include the position of Islam in relation to women, a trope much favoured by Western Orientalists in the past. This legacy from European representations of the Arabo-Islamic culture and its individuals - racialized in this 'religious' manner - re-inscribes the present narrative within a colonial tradition and correlates feminism to imperialism. The negative implications of the use of Islam by feminist scholarly activity in East and West soon become evident

as women are reduced to Orientalized subjects. The critical perspective implemented by the Algerian academic Marnia Lazreg in her examination of First World feminist discourse about the so-called Arab woman is prominently featured here to theorise the tumultuous and conflictual conceptions of feminism between East and West.[13]

Finally, the methodological dualism of feminist criticism, that is developmentalism and Culturalism generates a multiplicity of dichotomies. A fundamental one resides in the distinction between the so-called modernist and the traditionalist. The inferences are as plural as they are customary and familiar, re-duplicating the problematical assumptions embedded in the setting Development versus Tradition. The need to address this binary formulation of research therefore arises as well as the need to highlight the complexities of the 'women question', using the evolutionary (not the static) aspect of such dichotomization as evidence for the maturation of women's criticism towards feminism. The final chapter then sums up the debate on colonialism, feminism and neo-imperialism and what it entails for the status of women as subjects of study and researchers. Broadly speaking, Western feminist writing is currently presented as inherently imbued with misconceptions and biases inherited from the Orientalist tradition and its origins within dominant and phallogocentric modes of

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13. Marnia Lazreg, 'Feminism and Difference: the Perils of Writing as a Woman on Women in Algeria', *Feminist Studies*, 14, no. 1 (Spring 1988), pp. 81-107.

representation. Replaced within this discursive context, the scholarly activity by women in North Africa and the Middle East may reproduce its theoretical limitations and indictments. But the emergent anti-imperialist critique by women writers in the area under study may resolve some of the dilemmas dividing feminists North and South and support the work already undertaken in this field by minority women in Europe and North America.

Defining Arab womanhood as a category becomes an ambivalent endeavour within the scholarly field, especially in view of the forceful return of the dichotomy in contemporary representations of women in the outside world - reclaimed vociferously by fundamentalist males - and in their self-conscious conceptions of themselves as well. In the light of the multiple divisions, whether hidden or open, incurred by many societies in the region along the lines of secularism and religion, material welfare and political interests, it may be argued that these representations tend to manifold the perennial and irresistible framework of modernity versus tradition.

As a final exercise, the ambiguous image of the woman as feminist is examined further. While the 'tradition' component is read as a signified for a signifier which is the *mutahajibat* or the veiled female figure, the non-*mutahajibat* embodies a different apparent meaning, that of modernism, secularism and Westernism. This phenomenon manifests itself at a universal level, dictated or generated by both Eastern and Western

discourses. However the secular model of femininity, exemplified by the 'new woman' is epitomized by the feminist. It becomes problematized further in the eyes of the indigenous culture and Arabo-Islamism (as discussed in Part One). The feminist becomes endowed with the regressive and disturbing values which associate her to Western culture, imperialism and to the female figures haunting the popular psyche, namely the pre-Islamic female, the sexual temptresses and beasts of popular fiction and oral discourse, in other words the 'Terrible Mother'.

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PART ONE

READING MALE DISCOURSES: THE WORK OF TRADITION

CHAPTER TWO

THE GENDERING OF INDIVIDUALS IN ARABO-ISLAMISM

The present chapter attempts to retrace some alternative processes of 'Orientalizing' or 'Othering' women,[1] where Orientalization is achieved by a process internal to Arabo-Muslim society.[2] A dialectical relationship is established between cultural conceptions of the feminine and a manhood in transition, that is, between an authentic (male) cultural discourse and the definition of a reality that dictates and specifies a certain behavioural and functional role for women. This role is not different in many aspects to the frame of

1. This process can be set against a similar phenomenon occurring within a Western textual tradition on the `Arab woman` as analyzed mainly by Edward Said. He examines the workings of the Western invention of the `East` and Orientals. However, women were constructed as Orientals in specific ways both within and beyond the region.

2. The Algerian novelist Assia Djebar, quoted in the introduction to the book by Malek Alloula, The Colonial Harem (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987) remarks, regarding the internal Arab perceptions of women, that they did not differ, after all, from those held by colonial males, in the external world (see chapter ten, section entitled `Definition of the Arab Woman`). The colonized society defended itself, under foreign occupation, by secluding and ferociously dominating its women, as the thesis tries to argue throughout. The present analysis entails to look at the phenomenon of Orientalizing women from within Arab society itself.

representation and construction of women deriving from Orientalism as a Western discourse, equally male determined and invested with ideological control.[3] The present process is equally systematic and perhaps more imposing in its structuring impact on sexual roles.

All the cultural traditions analyzed here, however varied in their mode of expression, share a common denominator: the perception of women in male discourse as a threat to manhood. Men seem to retain authority in shaping and defining the world, and also in arranging it in the way that suits them best. Women, while endlessly depicted as devious and all powerful have somehow remained the passive recipients of male ideologies and fantasies and the objects of male strategies deployed for containing their presumed power. So, the power of castration appears as real and yet remains submerged or controlled by the way it is located in the stories discussed here and in the culture at large. The question that arises now is, how else are women seen as or conceived of as passive?

The analysis of Muslim sexuality advocated by the Tunisian scholar Abdalwahab Bouhdiba, is extensively used in the present chapter. It offers valuable information about the levels of meaning affecting both men and women as social beings within the culture under study here, as

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3. The two discourses on women, one established by colonialism and the other by a local culture, were common in many aspects, mainly in their representation of a subservient image of femaleness, one which was not however devoid of devious and harmful power. But `Eastern` culture tended to de-sexualize women.

well as insights into the structures that ultimately construct gender, male social and sexual behaviour. By examining Bouhdiba's work, one manages not to solve the 'problem without a name', but to bring out unsuspected keys to it. At least, we discover those apparently holding the secret of the male psyche, firstly through what Arab and Muslim culture displays in terms of information but also, more interestingly, through what the author's own discourse reveals about his personality, self-consciousness and bias as an indigenous male author, one constructed by the same paradigms he sets out to uncover. There is a question here about the relevance of male research for feminist investigation, since there seems to be, inherent in his formulation and cogency, a masculinist bias.

Sexuality in Islam, is a kind of archeological search which attempts to excavate, among the ruins of Arab civilization, signs of an originally pure and perfect order. There, according to the author, eroticism and faith were locked away in a ravishing enchantment of the senses and the soul that reached an orgasmic fusion with the eternal and the divine, providing meaning and impetus to the earthly existence of believers and to their life in the hereafter.[4] So, as a male, Bouhdiba marvels at the wonders of creation and at the original unity between Eros and Faith, even if, according to him, such symbiosis existed only in the early stages of

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4. Bouhdiba, Sexuality, p. 82.

Islamic civilization.[5] His tone is quasi-lyrical and his style smooths away any abruptness that might arise with occasional controversial issues such as polygamy or prostitution approached in this text as a quasi-homely institution. Asha Ghassan, another male writer, has already noted the problems of bias as strategic blindness characterizing the Bouhdibian project.[6] Female subordination is resolved for him by the outlets elaborated by society for its equilibrium and survival. Some of these outlets are expressed through the cultural superstructure.

2. 1. A male Interpretation of Muslim Sexuality

Historically, Abdelwahab Bouhdiba sees the sexual division characterizing Muslim society as deriving from a gradual loss of what used to exist, in his words, as 'a harmonious synthesis and a permanent adjustment of sexual ecstasy and religious faith'.[7] His exegesis conveys explicit and tacit messages about the issue of women. He nevertheless admits that women are paying a heavy price in order to maintain society as close as possible to what is believed to be a positive model of sexual and social behaviour but which has become a stifling order as

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5. The author may be referring to what is also known as the Golden Age of Islam.

6. Asha Ghassan, Du statut inférieur de la femme en Islam (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1987).

7. Bouhdiba, Sexuality, p. vii.

'sexual division turned into an unhuman, untenable social dimorphism and a source of untold suffering'.[8] This work leads him to suggest that the legendary misogyny of Arab societies needs to be relocated in the history of the Arabo-Islamic heritage as it structured the individual and collective unconscious. This heritage derives from a view of the world whose meaning has a dual source: a homogeneous combination of the sacral and the sexual.[9] This model, the author claims, has collapsed today and faith and love are no longer complementary.[10] This view contrasts with that of Christianity whereby a decisive separation between religious practice and sexual activity was initiated as an outline of existence.

2. 1. 1. Religious Conceptions of Wedlock

The contrast between traditional Islamic and Christian categorisations of the sexual may be exemplified by the imposition of compulsory celibacy in monastic life during the European middle-ages and a negative attitude to sexuality throughout history. So, marriage was looked upon with some scorn[11] by the early fathers of the Church because of its link with sexuality.

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8. Bouhdiba, Sexuality, p. 231.

9. Bouhdiba, Sexuality, p. 5.

10. Bouhdiba, Sexuality, p. 5. Bouhdiba refers to this discontinuity in a romanticized manner, as `a crisis in faith and love`.

11. See Karen Armstrong, The Gospel According to Woman: Christianity's Creation of the Sex War in the West (London: Pan Books, 1986), p. 7.

However, in the Islamic vision, marriage - or the institution of *nikah* - as Bouhdiba refers to it,[12] is sought as a fulfilment of self and is endowed with religious sanctity for the good believer, so celibacy was condemned as a quasi non-Muslim state. People were strongly advised to marry and thus to fulfil 'half of their religion'. It is interesting to note how much this view of humanity contrasts with that of Christianity and how far the implications of both attitudes still hold sway in the two societies, especially as far as the woman question in both East and West is concerned. According to Armstrong, the family became a 'holy Christian vocation',[13] late in history. She contends that the modern tendency in Western society to disregard the institution of marriage, often attributed to the woman's liberation movement and the new sexual freedom that has destroyed 'old values', may in fact indicate a return to even 'older values', that is, the disparagement of the family in accordance and continuation with an established religious legacy.[14] She thus refers some aspects of the present day situation of women and the family in the West to a residual Catholic attitude. The depth to which values and teachings are embedded in the human personality does not seem to be characteristic of the Muslim individual alone, but also of people commonly

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12. Bouhdiba, Sexuality, p. 15.

13. Armstrong, The Gospel, p. 8.

14. Armstrong, The Gospel, p. 8.

believed to be brought up and socialized outside any religious dogma.

It is necessary to explore the workings inherent in the posited blissful ideal of Arabo-Islamic culture, whether this situation prevailed in a post-Islamic age as Bouhdiba claims or in the pre-Islamic era as other theorists put it. Women were necessarily conceived of as equal and active in the Bouhdibian vision. As such, it becomes necessary to comprehend the deterioration in these workings. Degradation in that early model led to erosion of their status and the splitting of the sexes along strictly antagonistic lines. As we have seen, Bouhdiba regards sexuality in Islam as an interplay within the social field of the forces of the libido and the sacral. His purpose is to understand the rupture that, he claims, occurred in that sexual, sacral and social model of Arabo-Islamism.[15]

The focus is, however, on the role of the family in the Islamic discourse and model of reality which projects it as the most significant institution. The contrast between the attitude of the prophets of Islam and Christianity, Mohammed and Jesus, towards the family may throw light on the position of women within the Arabo-Muslim and Western/Christian perspectives. While Jesus (a single man) saw the family was a burden that distracted him from an urgent mission,[16] Mohammed, on the

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15. Bouhdiba. Sexuality, p. 15.

16. Armstrong, The Gospel, p. 10.

contrary, put his family at the centre of his work and involved his wives in the running of his public affairs; this reflected the central position of women and the family in theological Islam and its discourse. As will be argued in due course, the patriarchal family became the cornerstone of the Arabo-Islamic cosmogony, its social organization and allocation of space. The position of women was tied up to their function in the family and to the domestic realm, which might explain the resilience of the patriarchal system to their emancipation. The social control exerted by Arabo-Islamic patriarchy on females soon became institutionalized since it was required as a prerequisite in the belief system. This was concomitant with the necessity to seclude women and to maintain them within the realm of domesticity. Wedlock and reproduction thus became binding notions in the lives of Muslim females, in contrast with the position of women within Christianity which was not so irrevocably centred on their duties within the family structure since the message of the Messiah seemed 'not to have considered the family to be an important or significant institution'.[17] So, according to Armstrong, 'the disparagement of the family can be traced right back to Jesus' and does not seem to result, as popular belief put it, to the women's movement and the advent of a 'permissive' society. In other words, both attitudes, the Western and the Eastern

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17. Armstrong, The Gospel, p. 8.

towards the family and women's roles within the home have historical origins and are embedded in the collective cultural and social consciousness.

Notably, the prominence given to marriage and the family by the prophet of Islam and his followers firmly linked the sexual behaviour of women, their lifestyle, their morality and social functions to the family and the private sphere, and this abiding link was sacralized by the texts of the Quran devoted to women and, centuries later, officialized in modern legislation. Hence the difficulty for Arab women today to address the issue of their subordination within the home without threatening, in the eyes of communal groups, to destroy the sacred structure of the family, hence to commit blasphemy and, on the other hand, to 'Westernize' the indigenous society.[18] Thus, in view of the enduring ties established by Islam between marriage and the individual, especially the female, the 'women question' remains fraught with dubious associations and the force invested in the patriarchal resistance to female emancipation becomes endowed with deeper implications.

2. 1. 2. Gender and the Public-Private Dichotomy

A glib categorisation of male and female spheres may disregard the many nuances that open up in a careful study of Arab societies. To posit a strict separation of the sexes into a domestic space for women and a public

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18. This idea is further examined in other parts of the thesis.

space reserved only for men raises questions about locating those women who leave their houses to work in the fields alongside men and older women's freedom of movement and speech. Not only do older women in the countryside in most Arab countries enjoy a freedom of movement quasi-equal to that of males (after having been confined all their lives to the domestic realm), but peasant females generally are neither veiled nor secluded. Whatever the reasons,[19] while allowed to cross the boundaries of sexual segregation, peasant and older women do not achieve similar autonomy to that of the modern urban female who appropriates male space or acquires mobility through a profession or education. Moreover, the dichotomy is a significant mechanism in Arabo-Muslim life to such an extent that it also prominently inserts itself into literary and critical production.[20] The significance of its embeddedness in the life style and the cultural system is reflected by its prominence in this thesis.

Broadly speaking, the division of the sexes follows a male orientation towards the external world and a female orientation towards domestic space, separated from world affairs and concerns by walls, curtains and veils. Yet there seems to be no similar focus of interest within male literature, explaining the purpose of such

19. In the case of the older female, there is an explanation, that she is perceived, at least by popular representations, as a-sexual.

20. The rest of the thesis attests to this assertion, especially Part Three.

segregation, its nature, why it came into being or analyzing its effects on the shaping of gender identity. The following traits, as described by Bouhdiba are singled out to illustrate the assertion about sexual segregation and its moralities expressing a symbolic activity. Nevertheless, the gendering effect of this dualism has not been a focus of analysis for the writer, in spite of his careful examination of some of its apparent layers.

A social division is engineered. In Bouhdiba's argument, the 'frontier of the sexes',[21] already expressed at the level of the physiological and the morphological, was drawn with circumspection at various other levels. However, according to him, one needs to transcend the differences to attain a homogeneous canonical frame where the sexes dissolve to unite again in one single embrace. The whole philosophy of Islamic spirituality and sexuality in his interpretation is based on the accordance of antithetical or discordant themes following the sacral/sexual pattern. First, the frontier between the sexes is marked by clothing since there are strict rules regulating the use of dress along sexual lines. While women should wear full-length dresses and cover their hair, men are advised to avoid wearing gold jewellery, silk and tight trousers. They are also advised to have a beard or a moustache, 'the symbol of virility, just as the veil is symbol of femininity'.[22]

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21. Bouhdiba, Sexuality, p. 37.

22. Bouhdiba, Sexuality, p. 34.

This is true to the extent that the most humiliating affront which may befall a man in Arabo-Muslim society is to be labelled in local gossip, 'a man without a moustache'. The insult applies of course allegorically, whether he has facial hair or not. This is illustrated for instance by the gripping story of some Algerian women fighting the sexism of contemporary society in the novel Le Printemps Désespéré by Fettouma Touati[23] and in a much older novel by a male writer Malek Ouary written in the inter-war period entitled Le grain dans la meule[24] where virility is equated with the moustache. In the same vein, the sexual (actual or presumed) behaviour of a wife, a sister, a female cousin or even of one's own mother, occurring outside the rigid boundaries of social ethics and 'honour' would be strongly associated with this kind of disgrace. So the man whose 'honour' is hurt

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23. This novel has been translated as Desperate Spring: Lives of Algerian women (London: The Women's Press, 1987). The following extract from the novel is a typical scene of Algerian households, that of quarrels between authoritarian brothers who feel called upon to redeem their sisters if and when the latter adopt independent behaviour. For instance, one of the male characters argues with his sister on the issue of boyfriends. The example works as an illustration of the present predicament about the symbolic value of facial hair for virilism but it is also an embodiment of the authority granted by society to men to rule over the domestic sphere and women's lives. It is, in this instance, the despotism of brothers over sisters whose movements, especially outside the house, are closely watched as they play a tacit role, that of guardians of the family's honour:
He: `Will you shut up? Who wears the *moustache* here?`
She: `You wear a *moustache*. All the tramps in Port-Said Square wear a moustache. Sewer rats have whiskers too` (p. 82). My own emphasis.

24. Malek Ouary, Le grain dans la meule (Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 1956).

by a close female's sexual behaviour would feel symbolically castrated and his manhood questioned by the rest of society. This is why honour and virility are still strongly attached to the tight control of female sexuality. An opposite principle lies in the quasi-obsessive need for young women to remove all bodily hair. The smoothness of the body should function as a true sign of their femininity[25] and mark their breaking away from virginity when they enter the institution of wedlock or *nikah*. Absence of bodily hair in a woman and presence of facial hair in a man are further gendering devices. This also expresses a psychological and spiritual categorisation of the sexes into dual paradigms. It thus appears that the problem lies within male conceptions of virility. Honour seems to be viable only within a void, the erasure of female sexual identity. The male principle thus emerges as a superseding referent and allowed to reign supreme. A psychological separation of the sexes also exists, in the sense that men can speak their minds, toughen up if the occasion arises, are domineering if necessary and become aggressive if coercion is required, while females are unvaryingly expected to be soft-spoken, reserved, gentle, and always

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25. So the operation of shaving hair from armpits, pubic area and legs is a whole ritual, usually performed, especially for young brides, before their first wedding night, in the *hammam*. It is here again, as Bouhdiba found out about male circumcision and other practices, more than a question of hygiene; it is the revelation at last of woman herself, a first step towards becoming a respectable wedded wife under the sign of anonymity. It also marks the entrance into a life where sexuality, revolving around the satisfaction of the husband's sexual needs, will assume an important place.

well-mannered and well behaved. Their eyes have to be lowered in the street. Having been socialized to move only in one space - the private - the dichotomous effect is then extended to the look.[26] Men do not have to submit to these social pressures. They feel free to stare at women in public places because the street is allegedly their territory so female passers-by become intruders. Aggression takes the form of searching eyes that try to break the intimacy of the female passer-by. Another aspect of the psychological division is the advent of puberty in the life of young girls which does not enhance the way it strengthens boyhood. And while female adulthood remains devoid of meaning unless it is crowned with marriage and motherhood, maleness is construed on firmer grounds at an early stage.

A sexual division is also initiated. Male sexual desire appears in the Islamic texts as predominant and superior to that of women and the satisfaction of male sexuality is then a priority in Arabo-Muslim culture. But this is not only the only interpretation as there is an economic factor, the unequal division of labour which also abides by the rules of sexual division: men are expected to work in the vast outside world and women within the realm of domesticity. Men's economic independence and capacity are reflections of their status and sexual potency, that is, an unemployed man cannot be considered as 'manly' as a worker and the successful

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26. Bouhdiba, Sexuality, p. 37.

businessman becomes the epitome of manhood. Women are encouraged to become housewives. In the eyes of custom and tradition, domesticity and housework are a natural state for women of all ages and the purpose of their existence. The entrance of women in the domain of work outside the house has not altered society's traditional attitude towards womanhood and domesticity. The strenuousness born of new responsibilities and duties are prominent features of female complaints which come out strongly in the interviews led by social researchers with working women.[27] Women are therefore overworked and seem to suffer from more ailments and illness.

2. 1. 3. Circumcision and Manhood

A significant issue regarding the fashioning of masculinity is male circumcision. Implicit in this formulation about circumcision is the notion of castration. Circumcision underlines the deep-seated complex of castration embedded in Arabo-Muslim society as Bouhdiba has shown. He argues that the operation entails 'a symbolic valorization of the phallus and an obsessional fear of losing it'.[28] The importance attached to the act of circumcision concerns specifically the strengthening and protection of the phallus, in spite of the possibility of reading it as a pseudo-castration.

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27. See the work of Fatima Mernissi, Doing Daily Battle: Interviews with Moroccan Women (London: The Women's Press, 1988) and, by Bouthaina Shaaban, Both Right and Left Handed: Arab Women Speak about their Lives (London: The Women's Press, 1988).

28. Bouhdiba, Sexuality, p. 183.

Circumcision fosters a new self-awareness in the little boy, namely that he is an important member of society and that he shares with the other male adults a specific feature, that of having a 'circumcised' penis. This feature is heightened by the celebrations that mark the circumcision act. The operation of circumcision entails a sacralization of the phallus. The child's heightened self-awareness becomes focalized on the penis in which it finds reflection of the patriarchal attachment to symbols of masculinity and a confirmation of his own phallocentric position, 'hence the fear that it will be cut off if it is not circumcised, or, even, that what remains will be cut off after circumcision'.[29] So, virility is constructed through the social interaction taking place around the little boy and also by specific customs and practices, all converging towards an image of manhood, egocentric and charged with power. Needless to say that absence of a parallel emphasis on the little girl's bodily features serves only to affect her self-appreciation and perceptions of herself, of her body and place in the world.

The use of Freudian theory in a comparative exercise highlights another aspect of patriarchal politics. The European scholar refers for instance circumcision (that is male circumcision) to an operation of castration that used to be practised in pre-historic times and from which it has then derived as a milder form of punishment. Such

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29. Bouhdiba, Sexuality, p. 183.

a view does not relate to the different history of the Arabo-Muslim world where circumcision's primary function has always been that of strengthening and protecting the phallus, that is to avert the threat of disease and castration. Its function derives primarily from a concern to enhance manhood. So, the punishment dynamic does not reign alone or supreme since the newly circumcised little boy gains through the operation a new sense of himself, his worth and his place in the world. Circumcision raises male childhood to a new level of experience and meaning that female childhood cannot attain. Therefore it does not stand for the father's retaliation against the son for loving the mother, fatherhood being equally enhanced and gratified by the circumcision of the son who thus becomes another man in the household. Circumcision might be read as the male attempt to devise ways to protect masculinity against the threat of the sexual female. Interpretation, at least in this respect, therefore works across the grain of Western scholarly views.

2. 1. 4. The Symbolic Fear of Castration

It may be argued, on the basis of the argument above, that, in men's self-obsession, there develops, consistently, the fear of losing its symbol, at least in allegorical terms. But such anxiety is deep-rooted in the psyche, conveyed by folktales, literature, poetry and

through many themes and symbols.[30] The authoritarian father-figure, as Bouhdiba seems to suggest, is also castrating for the little boy.[31] He chartered further this issue in metaphorical terms by mainly defining as castrating the 'essentially authoritarian, Arabo-muslim society'.[32] This widens out the castration issue which it emblemizes through the political. There is a kind of consensus on this idea of political castration as this sexual anxiety is transposed by the collective unconscious onto the political and economic nature of Arabo-Muslim societies. Regardless of their respective biases, cultural beliefs, political choices and socio-economic positions, writers tend to agree on the 'castrating effect' of the political and cultural systems prevailing in modern Arab societies.[33] The castration fear here does not seem to originate in the attempt at curbing women's power seen as a threat in common terms. It is also a product of a profoundly restrictive and inhibiting political climate. Self-expression, creative power, freedom of thought and individual fulfilment are

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30. Bouhdiba refers to the presence of the castration theme in the `Arabian Nights`. It is also read in the mythology about the ogress as well as in proverbs, local sayings and beliefs.

31. Bouhdiba, Sexuality, p. 220.

32. Bouhdiba, Sexuality, p. 220.

33. See an article by Rana Kabbani, `Why Muslims Fear the Future`, The Guardian, 21 August 1992, p. 17. In this text, she speaks about the position of Arab governments towards the conflict in Bosnia, describing them as `shamefully silent, corrupt and "castrated"`. My own emphasis.

then stifled. Misogyny is then expressed in terms of deep sexual anxieties and confusions.

2. 2. The Fashioning of Femininity in Arabo-Islamism

The tales and legends but also other fragments of popular culture used throughout this research might supply evidence from oral and theoretical viewpoints. Folk tales, in spite of their link with the world of fantasy and the purely imaginary draw on the daily material lives of people and may represent manifestations of the collective unconscious.

2. 2. 1. Popular Culture And Rituals

The employment of the Arabo-Muslim heritage and of cultural behaviour in many studies by women (including this one) is an attempt to grasp concepts of the feminine across the ages, from a thematic viewpoint, that of femininity and from a theoretical one, that of feminism. But, it helps to read the fundamental structures of such heritage as forged by patriarchal traditions.

In the socialization of the Muslim individual, another traditional practice described by Bouhdiba[34]

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34. The extensive use of the *hammam* in this study is justified by its importance as a rich cultural referent in Arab societies and because it is, as Bouhdiba outlines, an oneiric process in the formation of perceptions and categories about oneself and the `Other`. Although this practice is less widespread today, women in North Africa continue to go to the local *hammam* as an expression of a tradition and as a social outing. For brides on the eve of their wedding, the visit to the *hammam*, practised faithfully to the present day, is seen as part of the ceremony. In the novel, Desperate Spring, one female character, the mother-in-law, mentions the Moorish bath as one of the only two

helps to draw the frontiers between the sexes, this time in a psychic and deeply oneiric way: through the practice of the *hammam* or Moorish bath. Such practices are relevant to the present study although they are not as widespread nowadays as they used to be half a century ago and were restricted to urban life.[35] The use of the *hammam* opens up a rich field for investigation as it helps the forming of perceptions about one's own self and body and the opposite sex as well. It partly contributed to fostering deep feelings towards femaleness, inherited today by contemporary men and women. The *hammam* has been - and still is for many families, especially in the Maghreb - more than a question of hygiene; it follows the idea or process, set by the early model, to separate the sexes and then reunite them within a symbolic activity. This is charged with opposite effects, working towards a final symbiosis according to Bouhdiba who explored at length this practice and its ramifications into the psyche by asking: 'What is one looking for and what does one find if not a warm uterine environment?'[36]

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places that a married woman should go to: `We are a family of honour and dignity. A young bride has no reason whatsoever to leave the house except to visit her family and go to the *hammam*`, p. 50. Assia Djebar also refers to the *hammam* in her novels, and in her short stories, Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement (Paris: Editions Des Femmes, 1980) where she speaks about it in eloquent terms, as an essentially feminine, social place, a kind of club, where secluded women have a chance to meet up with other friends, older women look for prospective brides for their sons and where even lesbian tendencies and practices have the opportunity to come out and flourish.

35. Bouhdiba also notes this fact. But it is the sedimentation of such practices and their values within the unconscious which is of interest here.

36. Bouhdiba, Sexuality, p. 172.

So the *hammam* is a highly meaningful cultural practice; children grow up in its warm atmosphere and wallow in its relaxing, dream-inducing combination of heat, perfumes, water and darkness, something that is sub-consciously reminiscent of the mother's breast. The *hammam* plunges, especially the man, into a 'uterine environment'.[37] The fixation of the boy on his mother is then conjured up again in the male *hammam* and transcended as it is normalized and therefore exorcized.[38] This is at least what Bouhdiba seems to suggest, as he claims that the *hammam* has finally done more to unify the sexes than to separate them. It allegedly helps to integrate them socially through the oneiric process which reconciles men with subterranean visions of the feminine, evoked by steam baths. The author's statement remains, however, more poetical than realistic. The practice of the *hammam* has been one of the effective devices in the forging of antithetical sexual paradigms, projecting manhood as essential and femininity as inessential.

The little boy soon leaves this world, essentially feminine, to join the *hammam* for men where the previous feelings develop into more evanescent and ambiguous form. He is abruptly separated from the female world at puberty or even before as he now follows his father's steps everywhere, including the *hammam*. He soon looks back on the gynecum whereby his former experiences of female

37. Bouhdiba, Sexuality, p. 172.

38. Bouhdiba, Sexuality, p. 172.

company, whether at home or in the *hammam*, were merely preparatory to a more real and consistent existence as a male individual. This is read as a passage from a female world, seen as trivial, secondary and superfluous, to a masculine world, seen as more worthy and essential and as a step forward towards manhood and the privileges attached to it. The male child develops, through this dual experience of the *hammams*, the first being the anticipatory event of the second and through the event of circumcision, a strong sense of maleness as an exclusive and privileged status which should remain unchallenged. Abdelwahab Bouhdiba sums up the situation as regards the impact of such socialization on mutual gender conceptions, especially vis-a-vis women:

> More seriously still, this is accompanied by the derealization of the female world. The world of women is a 'sub-world', devoid of seriousness and all too easily treated with the contempt that boosts the male's confidence in himself, in his knowledge, in his wishes and in his power.[39]

Such 'collective derealization'[40] of women and manifestation of misogyny thus layer various stages of the individual's life.

Proverbs remain a thriving source of images of women as conveyed by the male popular psyche. Wisdom and tradition seem to project pictures of devious and dangerous females which contrast with the more innocuous

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39. Bouhdiba, Sexuality, p. 169.

40. Bouhdiba, Sexuality, p. 179.

images evoked by the *hammam* and which are reminiscent, as argued earlier, of the loving mother. Oral discourse about women then tries to contrive and neutralize harmful female powers using many remedies and advice. Some of this counselling is channelled by proverbs. An example, the Algerian saying which states that 'one may sleep comfortably if one's opponent is male but one should remain on guard all night long if the enemy is a female'.[41]

2. 2. 3. Femininity as Power: 'Shahrazad'

The folktale is an ideal path to follow in tracing the castration fear as revealed by the unconscious. Bouhdiba is well aware of the power of the tale which he decodes in his theory of Muslim sexuality. He refers extensively to the treasure of meaning embedded in the pillar of Arabo-Muslim folk literature, the story of <u>The One Thousand and One Nights</u>[42] which so vividly appeals to a universal taste for dream and fantasy. The most popular image of femininity remains that of the narrator/character, that is Shahrazad herself. She is endowed with a structural centrality and significance and an epistemological virtue not only vis-a-vis the text itself but also in relation to the culture it stems from and its perceptions of women. The 'Arabian Nights'

41. The importance of oral cultural discourse is discussed further in chapter five.

42. The <u>One Thousand and One Nights</u> is considered the perennial text of Arabo-Muslim cultural reference and the pillar of Arabo-Muslim literature.

offers a rich field of investigation for scholars in various fields. Bouhdiba has interpreted aspects of the legendary tales as he demonstrates the workings of sexual behaviour in Islam and his study can be recovered for a feminist assessment of the tales.[43] But first, it is as a manifestation of a male cultural discourse on women that the famous tales are recovered within the present chapter. The critic's own male bias is revealed by, for example, his controversial claim that Arab misogyny was perhaps, after all, fostered by an originally genuine love men had for women but which was perverted by women's own devious and treacherous nature.[44] They have thus become unworthy of such affection and deserves punishment, which the king Shahrayar performed in the daily killing of a virgin with whom he would have spent a single night of love. Shahrazad however, threatened with a similar fate like her sister Dounyazad, appears to restore order and truth which turns out to be 'feminist' truth.[45] To quote Bouhdiba's own words on the subject:

> We are here at the peak of misogyny. Then Shahrazad appears to reverse the tendency dialectically. For her, it is a question of curing the king. She sets in train a whole therapeutic process through the spicy tale,

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43. Some interpretations of the famous tales project the impact of the narrator's role, that of princess Shahrazad, in passive and rather negative terms. See for instance the following article `Shaharazade, les histoires et l'Histoire ou les pouvoirs des mille et une nuits` by Monique Gadant, in Femmes du Maghreb au présent: la dot, le travail, l'identité, ed. by Monique Gadant (Paris: Editions du CNRS, 1990), pp. 301-315.

44. Bouhdiba, Sexuality, p. 132.

45. Bouhdiba, Sexuality, p. 132.

> eroticism, words, fantasy, dream. Shahrazad is self-revelation through the mediation of woman. Woman, who brought man to perdition, can also save him.[46]

And, more importantly still, Shahrazad is educated. She becomes therefore meaningful on several planes: she is in historical terms, a powerful female figure, which presupposes perhaps the widespread existence of a similar model of womanhood, at least among the upper classes of the medieval world. Moreover, she represents, in terms of feminism, a striking historical presence, an authentic female voice in one of the most widely read and most familiar texts in Arabo-Muslim culture. The reading of the tales has never been exclusively confined to the educated and literate elite only and for that matter restricted to a classical reading among adults, but was widespread among the lower classes through popular story-tellers or the *meddahs* who maintained an oral transmission of various tales, with all that implies concerning the continued variation and adaptation of the stories. The tales reveal the deep-seated fear of castration vis-a-vis femininity. Bouhdiba has already outlined the overwhelming presence of the castration complex in a large part of the 'Arabian Nights'. He cites the story of Aziz castrated by his mistress with the help of her slaves, who then told him scornfully when the operation was over: 'Return whence you came ! You are of no use to me. I keep all that was ever valuable

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46. Bouhdiba, Sexuality, p. 133.

to me'.[47] So in the stories, castration figures in real terms. Symbolic castration is also conveyed by other narratives as the story of the fisherman testifies.[48] He was wandering one day in the woods where he discovered an isolated castle. A lonely and distressed prince lived there, imprisoned in its walls. His cruel wife used witchcraft and changed the lower part of his body into a cold marble stone, leaving only his chest, arms, legs and head in human condition. The prince remained seated in that state for several years, absolutely motionless and totally impotent. So he spent his time mourning his fate in the midst of loud sighs and floods of tears. Meanwhile, his witch wife was frolicking around the castle with her lover, a male Black slave, having rid herself of her bothersome husband, too effeminate for her taste. Shahrayar, the king, kills his successive brides in order to protect himself from their cruelty and the pain that they can inflict on him through their disloyalty. Their unfaithfulness, universally established by the numerous experiences of men, casts a universal doubt on virility. The critic's own appreciation of Shahrazad's power in reversing the course of destiny and destroying established truth - a male truth - is positive for women as he advocates that the king 'was giving in against his will to a militant,

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47. Bouhdiba, Sexuality, p. 185.

48. Story from The One Thousand and One Nights. See the English version edited by Edward Stanley Poole (London: East-West Publications, 1980).

frenetic, ardent but effective feminism and in every point in accordance with Islamic teaching'.[49]

The theme of castration, as textually featured within the archetypical tales, is developed further in other extracts from folk literature and fiction. Some of its textual manifestations are presented here with the purpose of reading manhood. It may be argued that the character of the princess is only fictional but she remains meaningful in terms of discourse, that of Arabo-Islamism and what it reveals in terms of gender perceptions. What Bouhdiba does not articulate sufficiently is the force of that discourse in imposing and manipulating cultural meanings of sexual identity. The positive effect of his dual vision of culture and sexuality is unilateral, linear and one sided; it excludes women from a share in a worldly vision which claims to be totalizing and universal.

2. 2. 4. Femininity as Transgression: the 'Ogress'

Castration anxiety may also be indicated by the presence of strong female characters in specifically North African popular culture; one key-figure within their imagery being that of the ogress. This recurrent image of Maghribi oral literature may also be indicative of a deep-seated fear regarding femininity. One kind of ogress, known in some regions of Algeria as Loundja is a female but one whose physical features are over-developed

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49. Bouhdiba, Sexuality, p. 132.

to suggest a beastly nature and animalism coupled with a sexual appetite raised to the size of her huge body. She is indeed enormous, with big pendulous breasts, formidable jaws and long untidy dirty hair. In terms of physical overdetermination, she is the ultimate female (in opposite terms to the princess, so they represent two faces of womanhood in mythological terms), one who is utterly dangerous for men's health and well being. Again, such description cannot be simply fortuitous and carries within it a fear of femininity which will be represented in this particular instance by a dishevelled, disorderly and disruptive kind of woman, in other words an 'ogress' if not ordered and controlled. The fear is also underlined by the fact that this wild woman (*ghoula* in Arabic) is a wicked creature. All these features combined with her voracious appetite make of the *ghoula* an extremely unpleasant female and a deadly creature. Most importantly, she is also, in terms of the discursive interpretation she holds within the present perspective, the embodiment of female castrating powers. Another criterion attached to this paranoid caricature and to the presence of the *ghoula* character as a living icon for an anxiety-inducing femalenes in the collective psyche may be indicated by the fact that she is in some representations one-eyed. It is interesting to note that Bouhdiba has already made, in his work, a link between blindness in one eye, on one hand, and infringement of sexual ethics on the other hand, as the translation into

Arabic of the term 'one-eyed' or *ora*, seems to suggest.[50] In this light, the fact that the ogress is blind in one eye is read differently: her sexuality is as disorderly as her appearance and this, in turn, implies that she is in a permanent state of *zina* or unlawful sexual behaviour (as understood and defined by another male determined discourse, the Islamic code of sexual relations). The 'one eye' could also be a representation of the sexual organ thus made visible in the face. Men have two eyes/testicles and 'good' women have two eyes as reflections of the male principle; only the ogress has one eye. Does this mean perhaps making visible in the face the 'dangerous power'? In any case, the ogress escapes any ethical code and ignores men's rules and their efforts at controlling her sexuality and erratic behaviour. This man-eater becomes, in symbolic but also in real terms, a castrating woman and considering all her other beastly features, one could label her a 'castrating bitch', a concept used by Karen Armstrong[51] in her study to qualify unorthodox representation of the feminine. One particularly interesting ogress in Arabo-Berber tales of North Africa or the Maghreb is Aicha. She is, like other ogresses, the endorsement of dangerous female power. She represents a menace to men's survival but at an unconscious level, she also represents the voracious female in the sexual sense. Another *ghoula* is

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50. In both cases, the term *ora* (meaning sin) applies.

51. Armstrong, The Gospel, p. 255.

represented differently as a beautiful woman/witch who ensnares men and then enters their bodies. Yet, another Aicha is known in Algeria under the label of 'Aicha-the-man' (Aicha-*Ra'djal*) which is explicitly indicative of her masculine and aggressive features.[52]

There seems to be a plurality of Aichas in the history and literatures of the Arab world generally who all account, whether fictitious or historical figures, for charisma and power, regardless of the value, positive or negative, one reads into such preeminence. A group of Algerian feminist academics who formed a research group in the mid-eighties carried out an interesting investigation into the specifically Maghribi/Arab cultural heritage and history in an attempt at deciphering a female voice and presence. They have come across several 'Aichas' in their search and thus outlined the significance of the name in Maghribi and Arab folklore in which they also noted its frequent occurrence. According to their findings, the 'Aichas' are highly spirited, starting with the earliest female character of this name in Muslim history, the second and favourite wife of the prophet Mohammed,[53] renowned for her beauty, knowledge and courage, incidentally, like Shahrazad, the narrator of The One Thousand and One

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52. Therefore, this name is given to females whose behaviour is judged too `manly`, aggressive or forceful.

53. See `Portraits de Aichas`, by Dalila Morsly and Marie Souibes, in Présence de Femmes (March 1984), pp. 93-105.

Nights. They appropriately remark, with regard the meanings that the name of Aicha seems to acquire:

> Lively because they are 'alive', but also because they love and enjoy life to the full, the Aichas are heroines of tales about energy, strength of personality, firmness, determination, but also cleverness, shrewdness and indeed of trickery and guile [54]

The immediate concern is to examine further male discourses on women through more contemporary texts, mainly gender in relation to nationalism, revolutionary rhetoric (even fictional) and colonization. Although the contextualization of this debate of the feminine in relation to political designs is provided by the specific case of Algeria, it is safe to assume that its implications impact upon most societies across the Mediterranean.

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54. Morsly, `Aichas`, p. 93. My own translation.

CHAPTER THREE

GENDER AND COLONIZATION: THE CASE OF ALGERIA

3. 1. The Historic Feminisation of the Colonized Male

Traditional historiography appears as a neutral and 'objective' form of scholarship although this neutrality can only be hypothesized since the recording and writing of history has been largely and essentially male: women's voices were consistently stifled, in spite of contemporary feminist initiatives to reread the historical heritage and unearth 'great' women of the past.[1] Everywhere, female historians are trying to bring back to life prominent (and less prominent) female figures who were buried under centuries of dust and neglect, hidden in the murky corners of history.[2]

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1. Research into 'great' female figures of the past from a feminist perspective raises a problem: how one can define the role of these famous women who often had, in view of their social, political or economic prominence and visibility, experienced a different reality, certainly one that shared little with the lives of the masses of women. Also, putting aside the obvious selectivity that the topic entails, from which angle can one define these women as 'great', a qualifier which may embrace male criteria on the world?

2. In the Arab areas, the earliest textual record of such an interest is traced back to 1185 when a male scholar wrote Biographies of Famous Women. See Charis Waddy, Women in Muslim History (London: Longman, 1980).

It is not just the writing of history which is male, history itself is a masculine enterprise. By analogy, the earlier gender dichotomy which divides the sexes according to culture/nature, visible/invisible, and ultimately as dominating and dominated, may be extended to colonial interrelationships. In other words, these tended to project and reflect a traditional segregation operating on the pattern of the gender binary division. This reading suggests that Western hegemony is equated with the masculine principle and the dominated group thus becomes associated with femininity, the former having initiated history and historization through its expansion, conquest and 'rape of the land while the latter was vanquished, subjected to the colonial act, losing in the process, voice, identity and consciousness. Following this line of thought, the land, the culture and the community thus conquered through the display of European male violence become, in symbolic terms, 'feminised', that is made to correspond to the feminine model, resisting and yielding to a movement that thrusts forward for conquest and domination. In the light of this argument, it is interesting to note that the writing of Third-World history by Western scholars from the ex-colonial powers falls itself into the trap of reproducing a defect on the basis of this symbolic gendered reading of colonization, something which is currently attacked in the work of post-colonial male writers,[3] in terms of an

3. See a thorough assessment of Eurocentric criticism of African literature edited by Onwuschekwa, Jemie and Ihechekwu Madubuike, Towards the Decolonization of African Literature:

imperialist bias and an Eurocentric prejudice. That is not to say, however that the anti-colonial discourse itself was often aware of its own internal contradiction, that is the phallocentrism informing its own approach, reproducing women as invisible.

The issue is further complicated by another consideration: the position of the colonial female was problematic as she contributed to the emasculation of indigenous masculinity and the invisibility of the colonized females. At least, this is what appears from reading some colonial accounts by Western historians and anthropologists.[4] Rereading these works critically, shows evidence that male colonizers were not alone in inducing suppression of identity in treatments of the colonized. In contrast to the more conventional feminine roles prevailing in the colonies and Europe itself, the wives and daughters of foreign settlers and landowners projected an ambiguous image of womanhood, away from the traditional view of women as essentially nurturing,

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African Fiction and Poetry and their Critics (London: KPI, 1980).

4. See Yvonne Knibiehler and Régine Goutalier, La femme au temps des colonies (Paris: Editions Stock, 1985). This book provides an extremist instance of female imperialist writing. The publishers' note locates the work in a series devoted to the history of women (Western women) introduced by the words 'La femme au temps de' and sets to explain the following: 'The history of colonization superbly ignored the second sex, and colonial literature only evoked it through erotic fantasies. The authors, themselves historians, explore this obliterated world of women. On the basis of multiple sources, they question, at the same time, the colonizers and the colonized'. My own translation.

loving and passive. During the earlier part of the colonial era especially, they came to remodel their roles vis-a-vis the colonized on those of their male counterparts. Yet there is another sense in which this masculine side of the European woman settler was more inhibiting. Regarding colonized men, she represented a threatening model of womanhood, castrating by virtue of her association with an hostile and virile setting, that of colonization. This ambivalent feature of the woman colonist engendered both attraction and repellence vis-a-vis the indigenous male.[5] This 'Othering' of the foreign woman may be parallelled to a similar process regarding the indigenous female as she represented an equally inspiring sexual symbol rendered attractive by her double position of subjection as member of both the colonial world and of an indigenous patriarchal order. This situation led to her further confinement, all too often suggestive of eroticism for all men concerned, following the Orientalist fashion,[6] in which case, an asymmetrical power relation is to be drawn.

The issue of the historic invisibility of indigenous women is tacitly or overtly conveyed by the literary output of African/Arab tradition generally where it surfaces again and again through a quest for identity

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5. One example of European female characterization is provided in Kateb's novel Nedjma, discussed in the next chapter. The French colonial female in this fictional instance is Suzy who is admired and despised by the male Algerian protagonists.

6. These interrelationships were evoked in the previous chapter and are formative of a specific Orientalized womanhood.

which is read, on one level, as a search for manhood.[7] In the last resort, it is a critical process that excludes, yet again, in post-coloniality, indigenous voices by women, sub-consciously perhaps too reminiscent for male individuals of a past that is to be discarded - a past which deprived their forefathers and themselves of a positive sense of identity and of patriarchal authority. This purports to be a matter of paramount significance in understanding what Peter Knauss[8] has called 'the persistence of patriarchy' in Algeria but also, in my view, in assessing its implications for the more global issue of the subordination of women. It might also serve or help to dispel what appears as a universal tenacious myth about Arab women's 'natural' subservience or alleged 'weakness' and provide therefore some light as to why the patriarchal grasp cannot be easily slackened or eroded in spite of major social and

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7. The next chapter is a fictional illustration for the present argument. For example, a scene featuring a search for a knife by the male protagonists reads as a quest for lost virility since the value of the object functions as a phallic symbol.

8. See Peter Knauss, The Persistence of Patriarchy: Class, Gender and Ideology in Twentieth-Century Algeria, (London: Praeger, 1987). An earlier study documents widely Algerian women's roles and position in pre-colonial and colonial times in a similar male ethnocentric perspective, see the work by David Gordon, Women of Algeria: an Essay on Change, (Harvard: Harvard Middle-Eastern Monograph series, 1972). The theorist of the Algerian revolution remains Frantz Fanon who also highlighted the role of women in it. See particularly the following works: The Wretched of the Earth (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967); Black Skin, White Masks (London: Paladin, 1970); A Dying Colonialism (New York: Grove Press Inc, 1965). However, he was criticized for having a male bias. More specifically, it is his position on the role of the veil in the revolution which is problematic as revealed by Marnia Lazreg in her article 'the Perils of Writing'.

political upheavals. It will be argued that this patriarchy and female passivity do not exist in a vacuum as they are fostered by specific premisses.

In the present chapter, the discussion is confined to Algeria, since it offers a striking example[9] of a country whose revolutionary struggle against foreign occupation brought about the full mobilization of men and women and fostered a new spirit for justice and freedom. Yet this revolutionary drive, born in the wake of the armed struggle, had little impact on the status of women. This fundamental contradiction is to be understood in the historical development of the Algerian identity and also in the history of Arabo-Muslim heritage. The revolutionary ideology which animated the fight for independence drew its foundations, inspirational force and impetus from religious sources, Islam and surely from

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9. It should be indicated that some Algerian women's expectations were met after independence. First, women benefited from schooling, employment and gained some autonomy. It is in terms of a general debasement of women, socially and legally defined as minors, and their exclusion from the realm of political power that the problem is first to be posed. But many feminist critics from the Third World constantly referred to the specific post-war situation of Algerian women to justify the failure of revolutionary regimes in dealing adequately with the 'woman question' in the region. Often, they do not substantiate their claim with factual information and tend to generalize the issue of women's roles in revolutions. Other implications of reference to the case of Algerian women is the appropriation of their historic experience and the projection of their position during and after the independence process in passive terms. One example of attempt at speaking on behalf of Algerian women is mentioned here in connection with the African feminist Awa Tiam. She declared in her book Black Sisters, Speak Out: Feminism and Oppression in Black Africa, (London: Pluto Press LTD, 1986): 'we cannot repeat often enough, Algerian women participated in Algeria's struggle for national liberation. But Algerian women have not been liberated,' p. 118.

an indigenous pre-colonial and perhaps pre-Islamic patriarchal system of communal customs which already favoured clanic and brotherly solidarity. It sprang to life under colonial pressures which elicited an anti-imperialist mode of thought and struggle, determined its framework and forged its principles, later adopted by the ruling party and the intelligentsia which had led the war of liberation. So, one might imagine that this revolutionary past would have been effective in undermining gender inequalities and patriarchal values since it allowed women to become visible, through their own active and varied contribution to the revolution, during the long years of struggle. This led women to enter an arena so far exclusively reserved for men (colonials and colonized to a lesser extent). Also, in view of the revolution's principles of justice and liberation spelled out in its programmes and constitutions, women were expected to benefit from a position from which they could rightly reap the fruits of their own revolutionary work and of the sacrifices and sufferings most of them had endured during the era of colonial rule and notably during the war. But the post-war situation confirmed the resilience of patriarchy in resuming its rights. So for most observers, it soon appeared that there was not just a residual lingering of patriarchy in the country as the old order was being swept away by the gales of the revolution. More alarming still, a revival of religious conservatism followed twenty years later. In post-independent Algeria, the

patriarchal hold manifests itself not only in the legal apparatus (as argued in chapter seven) and social organization, but in a more consistent and eloquent manner, in the daily behaviour of men, through so-called machismo.[10]

3. 2. Womanhood: Repository of Cultural/National Identity

One basic explanation for patriarchal resilience lies therefore in this historic 'feminisation' of the colonial subject pushed back to the private sphere or the feminine realm. This tends to stress another issue at stake in the performing of roles of resistance, one of them requiring women to be the trustees of national identity and the custodians of the Arabo-Islamic identity. They were expected to play such roles as prescribed by men. So it would be difficult to dissociate the question related to the making of the female colonial subject as 'Oriental' from both perspectives, internal (indigenous culture) and external (Western culture). This takes into account the issue of

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10. In Algeria, the term used by men to refer to this form of machismo and male hauteur as Knauss called it, is '*ra'djla*', a derivative stemming from the Arabic word for '*ra'djol*' (meaning man). This concept is linked to an inflated sense of male ego and virility. One of Algeria's most acclaimed contemporary films, Omar Gatlato, reflects the male sub-culture prevailing in the streets of Algiers and of many Arab capitals. The main actor boasts about it in the opening scene of the film, saying that it is all a man has. His nickname 'Gatlato' (which means in the male street jargon that this *ra'djla* is so overwhelming, it virtually kills him) is thus bound up with this particular notion of masculinity which is a principle of life, a source of pride and a code of conduct.

a male voice and how it was silenced and male identity estranged within a specific historical process and what were its own strategies, conscious or unconscious, in identifying and forging frames of identity and in so doing eluding the threat of castration or the menace of emasculation it perceives in ascendent models of womanhood. As an outsider in Algeria, Peter Knauss was 'often struck by authoritarian behaviour and 'machismo' which he witnessed frequently'.[11] He argues:

> This machismo ranged from extreme insensitivity to outright bullying by males in positions of authority. I came to believe that the Algerian form of male *hauteur* was something new to me It appeared to be a pattern of 'institutionalized' machismo, which seemed an important part of Algerian political culture warranting serious analysis.[12]

This argument is not articulated on the basis of a gender approach. Its emphasis lies on the presentation of a main thesis, that of the symbolic function of Algerian womanhood in preserving, throughout the country's long history of domination, the meaning and cohesion of society. Motherhood, more than femininity, however, becomes the absolute recipient of cultural identity and also the ultimate refuge to which the self, especially in conditions of crisis and doubt, aspires.

Knauss argues that French fierce attempts to suppress Islam and Arabic from Algeria produced a strong

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11. Knauss, Patriarchy, p. ix.

12. Knauss, Patriarchy, p. ix.

reaction from the native population to protect their belief system and language as components of their personality and national identity. So 'the French, by their negation of everything that was authentically Algerian, mobilized in the oppressed Algerians a longing for the affirmation of everything that was authentically Algerian'.[13] Women paid the price as they became trapped in the struggle for land, freedom and identity as required by the revolution and defined by men:

> Algerian women, in particular, became the double prisoners of this nationalist antithesis of everything French. They became both the revered objects of the collective act of national redemption and the role models for the new nationalist patriarchal family.[14]

But these hardening attitudes from the Algerians are not to be interpreted solely in terms of defiance against colonial policies of physical and cultural annihilation as the quote above would tend to suggest, but as a more complex phenomenon of finding a voice, forging an ideological process and resisting an imperialist plan. So it is constituent of the making of an Algerian national identity, essentially male. Indeed women who ideally represented the symbolic terms of the confrontation, were sacrificed on the altar of the revolution. It could also be argued that such roles, exacerbated by the context of the revolution as suggested earlier, were fostered by the prevailing culture and

13. Knauss, Patriarchy, p. xiii.

14. Knauss, Patriarchy, p. xiii.

already subscribed to women by customs, even during colonization. The radicalization of resistance in various domains led to asserting the function of femininity. It is in a similar fashion (perhaps a less dramatized one) that views of the feminine are expressed and enacted elsewhere in the Arabo-Muslim world. In any case, on this premisses of French politics of aggressive and intrusive alienation and the counter-acting Algerian cultural and political resistance (among other forms of resistance), the role of women was charged with a nationalist meaning to be stressed and given due attention during the war. Along with their active involvement in the struggle for liberation or through their daily survival, women were required to uphold Islamic values and maintain the moral and social cohesion of the community. The problem lies therefore in the ideological framework of the Algerian revolution as set by male nationalists. Its ideological programme appeared as impressive and original largely in its political radicalism, that is, in so far as it aimed at liberating the country from foreign occupation and restoring individual and collective identity. But in spite of the grandeur, depth and awareness of its vision, it relied on narrow customary setting whose values try to restore an older order of social organization, pre-colonial and somehow archaic. Knauss argues:

> When a succession of men of petty bourgeois origins attained leadership positions in the mass-based pre-revolutionary nationalist party and after 1954 in the FLN, The National

> Liberation Front, the ideology of the Algerian revolution was already in place. It was an ideology of cultural restoration wrapped in the mantle of radical nationalism. In spite of the participation of upwards of ten thousand women in the revolution, their future status was already shaped and dictated by the imperative needs of the male revolutionaries to restore Arabic as the primary language, Islam as the religion of the State, Algeria as a fully free and independent nation, and themselves as sovereigns of the family.[15]

Colonial attempts at suppressing Algerian national culture and identity led to feelings of distrust and bitterness among the local population towards French policy-makers. For the Algerian male, more particularly, those sentiments led increasingly to the belief that his religious and linguistic background were being dangerously and conspicuously eroded, his cultural referents destroyed and the basis of his family undermined; in other words the stifling colonial environment which withdrew real authority and power from him (by reducing his access and role in the public world), fostered deep feelings of frustration in him at being so reduced to a mere colonial subject. Under these conditions the indigenous male developed anxieties about his status, his place in the world and his self-worth. Knauss also invokes in his analysis the preeminence of Arabo-Islamic culture in the make-up of the Algerian personality and which succinctly transpires in the form taken by cultural resistance.

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15. Knauss, Patriarchy, p. xiii.

This opposition was first coherently organized and led by a group of Algerian Muslim doctors. They gathered in the early forties in a reformist movement with the mission of spreading literacy and Islamic knowledge among a population so far kept in ignorance by the colonial regime. Such move by the scholars known as *Ulemas* was a nationalist endeavour as they advocated the need for education as a primary form of struggle against the occupier, a way of preparing the mind and the soul for the coming challenge. It is interesting to note, with Knauss, that they distinguished between the education of boys and girls. For the latter, they advocated the need for moral instruction which evidently puts the stress on their future role of mothers and wives. In other respects, they were recipients of a certain moralistic ideology and spirituality to withhold the purity of the nation. Knauss who studied Algerian history also realized the significance of the reformists' policies as a form of resistance to the multiform threat posed by European colonization against an Algerian cosmogony which stressed its allegiance to pan-Arab nationalism as part of its own identity. The French colonial administrators too realized the subversive implications of such initiatives and cracked down on the *Ulemas'* schools and institutions, making any further meetings and teaching illegal. Knauss, who appreciated the dimension of the problem for Algeria in its transition from a colonial entity to a nation-state sums up as follows:

> Islam became the beleaguered symbol for a separate Algerian identity. A Muslim program was available to Algerians during the interwar period. This program promised to fill the psychic void left by destruction of the patriarchal extended family and the loss of economic livelihood to hundreds of thousands of Algerians.[16]

The Muslim program in question sought a revival of religious values within a nationalist thesis and was formulated in the following slogan, by Ben Badis himself: 'Arabic is my language; Algeria is my country; Islam is my religion. To this program was added implicitly: "patriarchy is my birthright"'.[17] Considering the predominance of masculinity in Islam (detailed in chapter five) and the importance of the latter in the cultural resistance and therefore in the identity of the colonized, French colonial attacks against Algerian selfhood and identity had a particular impact. Dominance by foreign rulers is a multiform aggression, among other things, against manhood and the alteration and subversion of a male erotic code. It also entails intrusiveness in the Arabo-Muslim social space so carefully drawn into dual spheres. So the boundaries which usefully helped to fashion and classify genders become blurred. It follows that the indigenous male, forced to relinquish his authoritative status, returns, at least in allegorical terms, into the private realm traditionally assigned to women. And, by retrieving into the domestic world, he

16. Knauss, Patriarchy, p. xii.

17. Knauss, Patriarchy, p. xii. Most school children learn the historic slogan of the *Ulemas* in their literature class.

subsequently assumes a female role. Therefore French colonial behaviour exacerbated the self-identification of Algerians with their Arabo-Muslim heritage as it struck at the very heart of society and specifically the Algerian (male) individual for whom it entailed at the deepest level an unconscious menace against his sexual identity and a disavowal of traditional virility. The frustrations culminated naturally in a fear of castration vis-a-vis the source of inhibitions and its symbols. Colonial policies thus met with a strong nationalist resistance, highly motivated by a will to regain land, resources, freedom and manhood. Restoring national identity entailed tacitly restoring the status of masculinity, the 'honour' of the family and the rights of an ancestral patriarchy. In spite of the active role women were called upon to play during the revolutionary phase, womanhood is invoked only to support the nationalist strategy and philosophy. Woman becomes an idea or spirit, that is denied reality and flesh, disincarnated or even derealized (as Bouhdiba puts it) and her passivity becomes a requirement of the allegorical value bestowed on her. This reasoning means also that she becomes a-historical and invisible, paradoxically at a time when her active role is required by the movement of history. This paradox permeates conceptions and representations of the feminine and will inform discussions throughout this thesis.

3. 3. The `New Woman` and Betrayal

the 'new woman' emerged in Algeria during the 40's and at the beginning of the century in countries such as Iraq, Syria, the Lebanon and Egypt, that is, during periods of political change and social unrest. In Algeria, this coincided with the period of nationalist activism initiated by the *Ulemas* and marked by a political turmoil stirred by liberation of Europe from the threat of Nazism, at the end of the Second World War. But women were divided by economic welfare and class, especially in this later part of colonization during which a limited number of young girls, mostly from urban families, entered the only schools available at the time, those established by the French administration for its own settlers. It is to be noted that these institutions were looked upon with a great deal of suspicion by the indigenous population who only reluctantly sent children, mostly boys, to enrol, responding to the new efforts implemented by metropolitan France. The aim was to provide some education for the colonized subjects in order to smooth the path of colonization, appease rebellion and prove finally in deeds, not just in words, its notorious 'civilizing mission'. Needless to say at this point that it was Western/French civilization which was meant by such term. But the number of girls admitted to these schools was low, not only in view of the colonial authorities' own discrimination and lack of genuine enthusiasm in spreading literacy but mainly because the parents' attitude was even more distrustful

towards the idea of their daughters' education being in the hands of the colonial authorities. The sheer revulsion many Algerians felt at the thought of their young girls trusted to the '*roumis*',[18] is further evidence that women were seen as the embodiment of Arabo-Islamism and of a specifically Algerian personality and selfhood, which made of their entrance into a European institution dubious and fraught with perils for themselves, their families, their religion and the idea of nation itself. This, added to the fact that many families, more strictly conservative regarding the question of female education, still believed that the only sphere of knowledge which was safe, valid and acceptable for a girl was through Islamic teaching, which encouraged them in seeking Koranic learning for their girls. In the countryside, where communal customs circumscribed people's lives more harshly and where girls, at a very early age, become burdened with farm work, the idea was seldom considered. So the weight of tradition and poverty were often among the motives that kept the girls in some households away from the classroom and this pattern persisted in some places even after the advent of independence when schooling for both boys and girls became compulsory. So only a handful of young girls entered the educational arena where they managed to survive the frustrations of an often hostile milieu. Many of the more privileged ones, who were not prevented

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18. The term *roumi* (feminine: *roumia*) used to apply (and still does) to European Christians.

by their fathers in seeking further learning when they could, even made it to university. Their education was entirely French as the educational system, in their case, aimed at making them into new 'French citizens', which would work as proof of the value of colonization at last. For the indigenous population, the distrust and hatred of colonial imposition only grew with the rise of the independence movement.

The 'new woman' was not exclusively an educated female. She re-emerged with more certainty during the revolutionary struggle which required from some women to go unveiled and to move with more autonomy, not to mention the fact that many of the newly educated females were even more adventurous in terms of dress and behaviour and discarded the veil. So the young woman emerging in the wake of liberation was not confined exclusively to the sphere of the home but started to walk the streets unveiled, apparently free and eager to live. They were however the constant targets of ostracism from the French and the Algerians[19] to whom they presented an alien and disturbing image of femaleness, closer to the European model than to the traditional one. Hence, they were, more than other females, expected to prove their loyalty towards their original culture. But they were still rejected and distrusted by both groups.[20] It is

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19. As asserted by various writers, including Fanon. A novel by Djamila Débèche attests to it, Aziza (Algiers: Charras, 1947).

20. See further discussions of female loyalty and its meaning in Arabo-islamic culture in chapter five and chapter seven (in relation to the concept of female rebellion or *nouchouz*). It

interesting to note in this context that, according to Evelyne Accad, female writers in Algeria who were to emerge from the ranks of these newly educated elites, opened the road to indigenous North African literature in French.[21]

Among the attempts of the French at eradicating the roots of Arabo-Islamism from the country, was their initiative in the final phase of the colonial period towards unveiling Algerian women,[22] which was met with a hardening of men's and also women's positions, even in the case of the educated ones who, openly and ostentatiously, clung to the veil. This piece of cloth, like the flag, became, once again, a symbol of national identity and unity and a means of struggle. The psycho-sociological significance of this battle over the veil, its cultural and religious implications was in pre-independence Algeria a constant source of debate; the veil itself having acquired a status unrivalled by any other issue related to the Arab woman.[23]

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is also referred to in connection with the issue of 'cultural authenticity' in chapter nine.

21. See Evelyne Accad, Veil of Shame: the Role of Women in the Contemporary Fiction of North Africa and the Arab World (Quebec: Editions Naaman, 1978).

22. Some of these attempts at unveiling the female indigenous population during the late phase of colonial presence in the country were initiated by the wives of some military officials. The connection between pro-feminism and imperialism could not be expressed more explicitly in the eyes of Algerian society.

23. For instance, the veil has become an overriding metaphor in discussions of Islam and women. See section on 'the analytical centrality of Islam' in chapter nine.

The notion of the changing woman as ascendent vis-a-vis the Algerian male is to be located then within such historical conditions and needs at this point further expansion. It leads on into an exploration of the various manifestations of such anxiety-inducing feminine models as the 'ogress' or the Arabian princess Shahrazad, before attaching them again to cultural images in relation to the issue of national identity. Paradoxically, the image that the 'new woman' thus projected was associated to the colonial French woman with whom it shared at least some notions, mainly the exposure of the unveiled body and the sexual appeal gained by women who could now, like the female settler, entice men and remain somehow unapproachable.

This close affinity between indigenous and colonial women was problematic for post-war gender representations: in the eyes of Algerian society the 'new woman' recalled the old image of the female '*pied-noir*' who stood allegorically for the imperialism they had suffered. She therefore became the tacit emdodiment of negativity, being reminiscent of the colonial threat that was again, up to that point, read in European womanhood alone in the context of occupation. The post-colonial female who emerged as a full citizen took the opportunities of education and paid work outside the house and as a result, her visibility in the public sphere increased. Nevertheless, she was still expected to play the role she was assigned to by tradition and which became embroiled with political idealism, religious

puritanism and a certain revolutionary utopianism. She was to carry on brandishing the torch of the revolution and to keep the sacred fire burning. To do so, women were, in spite of the new appearance and the values many of them adopted and the progressive changes being gradually introduced by progress, modernism and development, to remain the respectable and impeccable daughters and wives that Benbadis was praising in his revolution. Female self-representation was expected to remain unadulterated by historical events, faultless and flawless in the face of a changing world believed to be perverted by Western influences. To show signs of change was interpreted as unreliable behaviour and amounted to an act of betrayal. The 'new woman' who breaks into post-colonial public space through writing or a profession therefore threatens (unconsciously) this post-independent newly found male authority construed on the basis of a painful re-appropriation of land and identity through revolution and warfare. This unfamiliar and somehow suspicious image of the modern educated female induced unease and a sexual anxiety as she was now perceived as 'castrating', fostering male antagonism. New self-awareness increasingly enmeshed women in a quest for sexual identity through the rediscovery of the body as the theme emerges in most of the new textuality.[24] This search of identity which expressed itself already through the political, tries now to invest the field of

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24. See chapter five, section entitled 'The Rise of the Feminist Novel'.

sexuality as well as intellectuality. This emancipatory endeavour clashes however with the expectations of the patriarchal family about moral cohesion and social harmony, threatened by the new freedom granted to women.

Bearing in mind the present debate, Algerian feminists' attempts at bringing more justice into society are interpreted against the background of the political culture and history of the country as well as that of the region. It may be possible to understand why feminists or any assertive women who reject the role of guardians of male honour appear as potentially castrating (in allegorical terms). Because some of them cross the boundaries of the sexual segregation, they become ambiguous women. So feminism is eventually read as the ultimate betrayal and the most serious blow against patriarchy and that is why it is conceived as essentially anti-family, anti-Islamic and evevn anti-Algerian or anti-Arab,[25] that is , pro-colonial.

3. 4. Male Antagonism in Context

The emphasis on the notion of male hostility derives from a concern: to understand 'machismo' behaviour in Algeria, the issue of violence against women and the implications both these questions necessarily have for women and their struggle.

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25. See further discussions on the topic of female assertiveness and its association with threat of social and religious disarray in the final chapter, in section on gender paradoxes.

The emergence of a more independent and assertive model of femininity in post-revolutionary Algerian society has been given special focus as it is an important historical process in the shaping of Arab/Algerian womanhood. Elsewhere in the Middle East, the rise of Arab nationalism led to similar developments in the situation of women and their place in society. But in North-Africa, male antagonism was soon unleashed against what society considered a shameless display of erotic signs as conveyed by the sight of girls now walking the streets dressed as *roumias*, with bare legs and uncovered hair. The antagonism in question was concomitant with a deep sexism and should be read as a retaliation against a femininity seen as disruptive and irritatingly invasive since it was appropriating what used to be an exclusive male public sphere. As a result, there was some friction and apprehension following the new adjustment of the boundaries separating the sexes. The 'frontiers of the sexes'[26] contributed, as argued earlier, in structuring gender and delimitating the interrelationships between men and women. This hierarchy and classification of the sexes is no longer consistent in post-coloniality. The new roles and identities aspired to by a generation of women throw doubts in men's minds about their own worth and place in the world. Hence the toughening of male attitudes towards women and female issues and the rise of hostile and 'macho'

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26. This expression was used by Bouhdiba.

behaviour. Again Knauss observed the problem of violent hostility against the female sex in Algeria and so invoked the need for woman to enjoy physical freedom, 'to be in control of her body, to be protected from street violence, physical abuse in the home'.[27] Unfortunately this work can only touch upon the issue of violence which is one of the greatest concerns of feminists as a whole.[28] For Algerian women, it was a significant problem during the troubled phase of politics and social turmoil the country has been undergoing since the mid-eighties and during which physical assaults against women, more particularly female students, have been alarming, vicious and widespread.[29] Stemming from a

27. Knauss, Patriarchy, p. 116.

28. Violence is one of the most important issues debated by feminists in the Third World. For instance, in Europe, members of the organization 'EMAF' (North African Women Organise) try, among other things to address issues of sexual and racial harassment of women. Another organization 'Women Living Under Muslim Laws' defines itself as an 'International Solidarity Network' and issues periodic reports and articles in a review bearing its name. One of the main concerns of the network is to fight terrorism and violence against women, to defend and speak for 'women whose lives are shaped, conditioned or governed by laws, both written and unwritten, drawn from interpreting of the Koran tied up with local traditions.' A special newsletter is added to dossiers, entitled 'Alert for Action' whenever a need arises to attract special public attention regarding urgent matters related to violent misdeeds against women. In addition, sexual mutilation practiced in some Arab and African countries, in the form of infibulation, excision and cliteridectomy, is investigated. There is also the organization 'Women Against Fundamentalism' based in London.

29. Evidence of violence against women in Algeria is abundant in films and documentaries shown mostly outside the country, in the local media, especially newspapers, reports by feminist associations and their newsletters and in the testimonies of women themselves. One distinguishes however between domestic violence and street or public violence. Also, verbal abuse and sexual harassment are defined as forms of violence.

pervasive hostility towards women and occasional upsurges of a deep-seated misogyny exacerbated by the stifling political, economic and social conditions, it culminates in machismo, male arrogance, scorn or even violence against the female sex. Verbal and physical bullying and the sexual harassment that women of all ages have to endure in the streets, their workplace , at school or even inside their homes are, after all, brutal eruptions of a deep-rooted hatred of women and a virulent manifestation of gynophobia. Hostility is heightened by the fear of castration particularly felt towards women with some power in terms of academia or personal strength, professional achievement and so forth. It is also significant to note that often the bullying of a particular female may be read as a vindictive treatment of females whose cultural and religious 'disloyalty' is accused of causing social disarray. At the collective level, when male violence against women is so systematically used and expressed at such a large scale as the example of Algerian recent history has shown, it demonstrates a kind of political strategy that uses religious extremist fervour to intimidate and drag the active female population back to the house and solve, at least partly, the problem of male unemployment or as propaganda against a rising party.[30] In other respects,

30. In some cases of street violence against women, political parties used women, especially young female students, as scapegoats and pawns in their confrontation and struggle for power: by frightening women, the aim was to discredit the Islamic movement and highlight its hatred of emancipated women. Some fundamentalists also resorted to physical assault to 'punish' those liberated or 'Westernized' females who did not

it may be interpreted as the expression of social anxiety and fear of the uncertain future which seems to be the lot of a generation of young men crushed by economic hardship and political terror and who, through the threat of violence they maintain over women, retrieve a sense of power. If it keeps women 'in their place' by returning them to the home, the present crisis of identity experienced by the unemployed or powerless male becomes more bearable: he still controls 'his' women. Other factors contribute to the worsening of the situation such as the totalitarian nature of the political regimes in place which are so reminiscent of colonial rule,[31] and which, in turn, constrain men's involvement in the public world and the decision-making process make them feel 'castrated'. In more historical terms too, the increase of violence against women and the prominence of an arrogant machismo behaviour is to be interpreted as a patriarchal backlash.[32] The parallel drawn here between colonialism and post-independence political conditions explains why men then seek refuge, like they did in the past, in an 'authentic' cultural system and an Islamic

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respond to their propaganda of female modesty, wanting the population to abide, willingly or by force, to their politics. Furthermore, members of the mob, young men, frustrated by unemployment and poverty and, in the case of some of them, with criminal associations, took advantage of the climate of political unrest to engage in criminal behaviour against women.

31. This point was discussed in chapter two, in relation to the issue of castration.

32. This structure in the development of Algerian femininity under patriarchal influence is provided by the analysis of Nedjma in the next chapter.

heritage in order to make sense of the world. The present revival of religious conservatism or the rise of fundamentalism in Algeria is, although rather incoherent, virulent and vociferous, an ideological pursuit still working on the trail of the *Ulemas'* teachings. It may reproduce therefore an original puritanical upsurge which seeks the redemption of society yet again via the symbolic order. And who else other than women embodies spirituality and symbolism?

The forthcoming study offers literary evidence to the present predicament and addresses the question as to how the feminine principle is manipulated by revolutionary ideology to uphold and sustain the ideas of nation and self, statehood and selfhood.

CHAPTER FOUR

REVOLUTIONARY MACHISMO: A LITERARY CASE, NEDJMA

4. 1. The Historical and Political Context

The aim in this chapter is male fashioning of an Arab/Algerian femininity through culture, society and history. The young heroine discussed here stands for the model of a womanhood which has been forged by culture and ideology. She is alternatively examined through the theme of female power which projects her as active and subversive on the one hand and then, that of patriarchy which renders her, on the contrary, as passive and invisible.

The former development is traced in the realm of contemporary North African fiction where striking female figures endowed with negative powers are to be found. More particularly, it is within Maghribi literature written in French but which remains in spite of its European linguistic vehicle or medium, deeply rooted within an Arabo-Berber and Muslim tradition as the following analysis will surely reveal. Within this, is written the ultimate *femme fatale* of such modern literature, the eponymous heroine Nedjma (meaning star in Arabic) of the work of the novelist

and playwright Kateb Yacine. This particular novel cannot of course be dissociated from the rest of Kateb's literary production: Nedjma represents only one facet of the entire fictional world of the author where it contributes, with other thematic lines and characters, to creating an organic textual body. So the heroine becomes, under other guises, present within other forms of writing, mainly plays and poems,[1] all produced by the artist who seems to be himself unable to reach the star and free himself from an obsession like the heroes of his stories, chained forever to a myth called Nedjma. That the myth is a feminine figure alerts us to the possibility of making unsuspected discoveries with which to enhance feminist awareness and women's voice.

In the novel, the mythical character of Nedjma starts to shape up at her birth. She was born in dramatic circumstances to a French woman who had a short-lived affair with an Algerian man. This story takes place in the inter-war period (1918-1939).

1. Nedjma has an overwhelming presence throughout the work of the novelist by means of explicit devices, like the use of the name itself but also other characters' names in different texts or through similar narrative parts in plays and novels; some less markedly clear signs are the utilization of common symbols and mythical categories in variously conceived texts. As a matter of example, the image of the ogress referring to the heroine is repeated in another story La Femme Sauvage (The Wild Woman) and taken over again in a play entitled Le Vautour (The Vulture). Extracts of La Femme Sauvage initially appeared in two issues of the review Les Lettres Nouvelles, respectively no. 67 (January 1959), pp. 1-6 and no. 32 (February 1962), pp. 7-25. In another work by the novelist, Le cercle des représailles (Paris: Le Seuil, 1959), appeared the story of `Le Vautour` alongside `Le cadavre encerclé`, La poudre d'intelligence` and `Les ancêtres redoublent de férocité`.

However, this man who might have fathered Nedjma, was mysteriously killed on the same day that he was in the company of his mistress, both having retreated to a cave, far from the city's eyes and turmoil. The suspected killer is the victim's rival, Si Mokhtar, an eccentric man who plays a significant narrative role at both the structural and the discursive levels: he is a mediator between all the characters and events. His role helps to articulate the narrative parts into successive chronological and ideological dimensions. As such and in view of the spiritual fatherly position he is called upon to assume among the young protagonists, he gains a deeper structural significance. He also represents one generation of the Algerian people, but one that has yet no part to play in the revolutionary struggle to come, historically voiceless. Si Mokhtar, bearer of many secrets, never reveals the identity of the male child Nejdma's father had already conceived in an earlier affair with an Algerian woman. Any one of the characters Mourad, Mustapha, Lakhdar or Rachid and even Kamel, Nedjma's husband, could have been the missing half-brother of the young woman. Also Si Mokhtar is rather promiscuous, seeking countless sexual adventures with women, whether Algerian or French. His involvement with the latter works as a retaliation against colonization. Men like Si Mokhtar stand for a 'castrated' pre-revolutionary generation, that of the irresponsible and despicable fathers. They indulged in

erratic behaviour and sexual frenzy as a way of regaining a sense of manhood lost in the colonial night. It also helps to erase memories of a shameful present and the burden of a painful past where the proud ancestors had been defeated by foreign invaders.

Jacqueline Arnaud is a French critic whose research on North African novelists, and more particularly the fiction of Kateb Yacine, remains one of the most authoritative accounts.[2] She raises the issue of the down-trodden fathers so vividly portrayed by the old man and the dubious father-figure he projects in the narration. She uses Kateb's own definition of such negative construct of fatherhood 'pères attardés trahissant les ancêtres'.[3] The male obsession with the themes of lost identity and collective pride is due to memories of ancestral defeats in European colonial wars. The country is evoked by Si Mokhtar as deprived of nationhood and having undergone endless invasions.[4] Throughout the novel, the multiple narrative voices keep the flow of discourse running in a steady movement between the channel of past and present. But the present is meaningless without the historical contextualization of

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2. Jacqueline Arnaud, Recherches sur la littérature Maghrébine de langue française, I (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1982); Recherches sur la Littérature Maghrébine: le cas de Kateb Yacine, II (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1982). I am referring mainly to the second volume.

3. Arnaud, Littérature Maghrébine, p. 146.

4. Kateb, Nedjma, p. 128.

the ancestral nationalist resistance. In this respect, the polyphony in the text functions in a seemingly continuous and unified voice even if the various narrations are scattered and seem to lack coherence and structure. This may be shown by some extracts from the novel itself where the many narrative voices are all, in turn, endorsing and developing the theme of the historical wound and of its enduring effect on the 'fathers'. This unifies the various protagonists in spite of their differences and rivalry as it also forges a continuity between them and their forefathers. Furthermore, the 'historical wound' helps to articulate the myth of return since the indigenous population often lived colonization as a state of exile: 'et les fils des chefs vaincus se trouvaient riches d'argent et de bijoux, mais frustrés.[5]

The thematic development of the novel is also charted in terms of a different movement of the narrative which is no longer looking backward. It projects the males into a blinkered past through a troubled vision. Such dialectical movement seeks in the central female character. The collective and individual identity disrupted by colonialism. This mode is located in a subtle and elaborate patterning of plot, characterization and of narrative structures such as rituals, tales and stylistic devices like metaphors and allegory. In this movement are involved the various textual strategies, which represent the two

5. Kateb, Nedjma, p. 103.

levels of reading. Firstly, there is a classic interpretation, one which conceives of her a symbol for the colonized Algerian land and people, with all the other implications such symbolic function draws to itself; secondly, there is a new interpretive assessment of Nedjma, more modern and feminist. To bind oneself to the initial reading is misleading and draws attention away from the fundamental problematic construction of womanhood the novel seems to suggest.

The two readings are not irreconcilable or mutually exclusive, as they both articulate a concern about the patriarchal identity of the protagonists. The second interpretive formulation, however, contrasts fundamentally with the earlier one in its critical reappraisal of the patriarchal world pervading the novel and its phallogocentric orientation. Therefore the critical activity naturally expands to the patriarchal uses prescribed for women. The initial reading is more descriptive in the assessment of Nedjma as an image for identity and nationhood but only within what seems to be a rhetorically pleasurable frame which leaves aside or simply ignores - when it does not argue against - the presence of the more reactionary meaning embedded in the novel in its treatment of femininity and what emerges as Kateb's deep allegiance to historic phallocentrism. Thus it indirectly purports to strengthen a patriarchal order that the novel conspicuously seeks to revive from historical death. The classic reading stresses the power problem posed by

the relationship between colonizer and colonized and fails to address sub-jacent relationships of domination existing within the colonial community as a whole, for instance between foreign women and Algerian men and between indigenous males and females.

The conception of Nedjma as a dubious offspring, conceived across barriers of race and culture, is seen in terms of a classic stand-point: the union is an unfortunate outcome of the father's decadence and sexual affairs with women from the rival group. Alienation is the outcome of such behaviour, followed by loss of a sense of virility. This is the reading from the stand-point of patriarchy. The sexual encounter between Nedjma's parents is thus read in this line of argument. However it is also a manifestation of a dubious process of recovering identity and some power for the colonized males who share with the colonial men an ambivalent attitude towards women and sexuality, in the sense that they both used it as a means of violating and invading the 'other' community. So men, from both the Western and Arab worlds, share the conception of women as constituent signs for collective identity understood in phallic terms and in terms of national integrity.[6] These implications will

6. The critical analysis of Alloula's Colonial Harem was couched in similar terms (this is also one of Fanon's arguments): the unveiling of Arab women in a colonial context amounted to unveiling Algeria itself and rendering the close colonized community a transparent one. The fact that both male colonizers and colonized held such beliefs and indulged in such sexist attitudes - if the opportunity occurred or the situation required it - make it liable to

be exacerbated among Arab/Algerian men by virtue of their position as colonized. Jacqueline Arnaud also seems to suggest such argument when she tackles the theme of 'l'etrangère' who intervenes between father and son in a dubious association which creates a kind of complicity between the three of them while breaking the last bond between mother and son. The child develops a sense of betrayal towards his mother - a highly privileged relationship in Arabo-Muslim societies where 'the kingdom of the mothers',[7] is surely fundamental in the little boy's mental and emotional growth. Also the encounter of the little boy with the French woman, as a mistress to his own father, or simply as his teacher at school, functions as a quasi-initiatory experience in eroticism. The generation of the fathers, represented in Nedjma by the young woman's absent father and by the old Si Mokhtar, sought sexual French women to retrieve something from their subdued position. But they soon realize the misery that their attitude brings to them; so they provide support to the nascent movement of revolt among a younger and more radical generation, engaged in an anti-colonial fight. These young revolutionaries are represented in the novel by Mourad, Mustapha, Rachid

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function in various frames of confrontation or encountering, including fictional ones designed on the pattern of Kateb's own literary endeavour.

7. See Bouhdiba's comment on this topic in his book on Sexuality in Islam, chapter entitled 'The Kingdom of the Mothers', p. 212.

and Kemal whose beliefs were forged in a more turbulent political climate (for instance the popular insurrectional movement of the thirties and forties and the subsequent students' revolts which the novel clearly refers to). They also seem to have resolved, without much apparent traumatic effect (at this stage at least) and to a certain extent, the complex of the 'foreign woman' and the ensuing guilt towards the mother-figure.

4. 2. Nedjma as Symbol of Freedom and Nationhood

For this younger generation, it is now the indigenous woman in the image of Nedjma who becomes the symbol of their liberation from colonial oppression, cultural alienation and crisis of identity. She thus becomes bearer of national values towards which converge nationalist ideals, a highly allegorical figure which polarizes the various scattered structures of an individual and a collective identity. This formulation does not take into account the problem of a femininity which, in a contrary manner, seems to remain so far voiceless and a-historical. Such move is apparently positive as it helps to trigger anti-colonial ideals since it finally finds echo in a war of liberation. Hence the quest for Nedjma but also the strenuous need to 'purify' her.[8]

8. This idea about purification is not about hygiene and needs to be linked to the 'purification' principle imposed by the FLN leaders on the Algerian population. It was about

In spite of its richness, Arnaud's reading does not tackle ideological treatments of womanhood on the part of the male revolutionaries. Her perspective is articulated on an aesthetic level, reflected, for instance, by her definition of sexual and moral contradictions as a kind of 'erotic trap'.[9] Beyond this analysis, I have above tackled the topic of Algerian womanhood from a feminist viewpoint which sets to empty the fictionality of Nedjma of some of its potent revolutionary content.

The sense of contradiction deriving so far from a variety of interpretive approaches to the novel are to be resolved in a development of the new feminist reading. The earlier and more conventional approach was exhausted by European and Maghribi criticism[10] (Arnaud's work is one example of such criticism) so far stressed the value of the young heroine as an allegorical figure for Algerian nationalism, land and

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adopting exemplary social behaviour. The early stage of the war was devoted to erasing social diseases such as alcoholism, drug addiction and prostitution. This was part of a process of resistance and of the spirit that animated it and that drew from the Islamic religion its purity principles.

9. Arnaud, Littérature Maghrébine, p. 401.

10. See particularly the following classic works of criticism: Jacques Madelain, L'errance et l'itinéraire: lecture du roman Maghrébin de langue française (Paris: Sindbad, 1983); Guy Daninos, Les nouvelles tendances du roman algérien (Quebec: Editions Naaman, 1979); Wadi Bouzar, Lectures Maghrébines (Algiers: OPU, 1984); Baiba Benkis, 'Le roman algérien post-colonial d'expression française', Présence Francophone, no. 9 (1974), pp. 5-14; Anne-Marie Nisbet, Le personnage féminin dans le roman maghrébin de langue française des indépendences à 1980: représentations et fonctions (Quebec: Naaman, 1982).

selfhood. Nonetheless, the dissonance between the two levels of reading is to be located elsewhere, within the further deciphering of Nedjma's narrative role. It is necessary to overlook any disruptive tone suggested by the two kinds of reading.

So, there is plenty of evidence to suggest in the so-called conventional reading of Nedjma that the young woman represents, among other things, the Algerian homeland. The analogy is skilfully set out in an elaborate parallelism between descriptions of the young woman and her femininity and that of places (towns, villages and landscape). A number of textual fragments illustrate this association quite explicitly. For example, Rachid recalls: 'c'est a moi, Rachid, nomade en résidence forcée, d'entrevoir l'irresistible forme de la vierge aux abois, mon sang et mon pays.[11] Another narrator makes an even more direct connection between Nedjma and the land by using the analogy of 'besieged cities'.[12] In La Femme Sauvage (The Wild Woman), Kateb Yacine colourfully embroiders on the plurality of images relating to women and the land and their value as a quintessential force reconciliating 'man' with nature and his roots. Woman thus quenches his thirst in the 'no man's land' of the colonial space deprived of any memory, identity and social/political significance. In the next extract, she is projected as

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11. Kateb, Nedjma, p. 175.

12. Kateb, Nedjma, p. 178.

the archetypal Mother who cares for them in the absence of the Father (male characters in novels written by pre-independence writers currently referred to themselves as orphans as clearly indicated in the quote below by the term 'orphelinat'):

> Elle était [...] plurielle en son féminin, et faite pour l'impérieuse affection du clan [...] et tous les habitués du fondouk, éclats de son propre sang ou rayons lointains et aveuglants de tribus croisées de désastre en désastre, tous venaient boire a son eau troublée, flairer son parfum andalou, provoquer sa violence africaine, reconnaitre son épaisseur sémitique, et s'embrumer de sa fraicheur d'Europe, avec le sentiment que cette 'Femme Sauvage' terre en friche pour les hautes herbes de la liberté, steppe immense et Sahara réservant son essence, était la gardienne de leur orphelinat famélique.[13]

The various ethnic constituents of the Algerian land and of its people's origins are enlisted in this lyric vision of the woman who gathers, keeps and nurtures the various meanings. Most of the criticism on this now classic novel of North African fiction, emphasizes the symbolic stand of such female characterization as first Algeria, the colonized homeland, and second for an Algerian identity forged into a distant past of Berber, Jewish, Roman, Arabo-Muslim, Moorish origins which melted together into nations which then confronted European invasion, cultural alienation and suppression of identity. In this light, the tireless efforts the young men display throughout the narrative to possess

13. Kateb, Nedjma, p. 125.

the ever evanescent and inaccessible Nedjma who feeds their fantasies and kindles their passion, acquires a new dimension. The quote above is also read as the search for the mother, which underline the eternal sub-conscious wish to return to the mother's womb. This reading of the allegorical function of the heroine has a collective effect: she maintains the cohesion and status of the social group. On the other hand, she sustains the individual male identities.

An important structural moment in the novel therefore occurs with the return of Nedjma to the Nadhor, the village founded by the ancestor Keblout, a move which can be interpreted as a return to the 'origin'. It constitutes an initiatory ritual in the re-appropriation of history and self-consciousness by all the characters as Nedjma is recovered after her long 'errance'. She will now nurture them and provide their shattered lives with coherence and purposefulness. Arnaud's thesis also states a need to gather again a personality and a destiny torn apart by colonization and to repossess one's land.

Nedjma's destiny parallels that of the country in a precise and intimate manner; it follows that if she stands for Algeria, the country also represents her. But the conventional metaphorical reading of women as symbols of national identity, ancestral land and territorial integrity, although a current and

conventional pattern for most revolutions,[14] is not quite adequate. This kind of interpretation which speaks of the women as metaphorical vehicles for the homeland, national sovereignty and individual integrity, is stereotypical and therefore reductive. The iconic value of this reading surely conveys power and contradiction. There is a restrictive value for the purely positive allegorical perspective which is now discarded in favour of a new gendered interpretation of women and nationalism.

4. 3. Nedjma as Symbol of Death and Evil

What seems to run as a permanent undercurrent through and across a chronologically and spatially fragmented but also a non-linear narrative is the evil power emanating from the characterization of the heroine. This sense of evil is sustained by a host of negative qualifiers and exacerbated by the use of various analogies, all textured together in such a way as to create the perception of the heroine by the reader as a destructive character. The message is also often explicitly stated in the characters' monologues. The writing falls into a tradition which is characteristic of North African fiction (or, perhaps with lesser prominence, in other Third World literature

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14. It is part of South American resistance iconography for example.

as well),[15] one that plays within heavy intertextual reference using archetypes of oral literature.

One analogy deriving from a local oral tradition and which emerges in the fiction of Kateb Yacine and that of a modern novelist such as Rachid Boudjedra lies in the use of the *ghoula*/ogress character.[16] Clearly, reference to this *ghoula* in the case of the heroine suggests that Nedjma is evil and a threat. There is a clear reference to the ogress in the following extract, underlined by the connotation of death conveyed by allusions to her the tragedy of Nedjma's parents:

> Et c'est alors que Nedjma fut conçue, étoile de sang jaillie du meurtre pour empêcher la vengeance. Nedjma, l'ogresse au sang obscur comme celui du nègre qui tua Si Mokhtar, l'ogresse qui mourut de faim après avoir mangé ses trois frères.[17]

There, it appears that the icon of the wild woman (or La Femme Sauvage, the title of another of Kateb's work) or of the ogress is translated from the discourse of oral culture into a 'high' literate discourse. Thus it becomes a typical literary representation of femininity in the novel which echoes a widespread attitude towards women outside the world of fiction. The word 'ogress'

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15. Contemporary West African literature is an example.

20. See a novel by Rachid Boudjedra, L'insolation (Paris: Denoël, 1972). One of the female characters, a nurse in a psychiatric hospital, is referred to as an ogress by the main character (also the narrator) who plays the role of a disturbed patient.

17. Kateb, Nedjma, p. 179.

is foregrounded in the text through its repetition within the same sentence. The connotation of death attached to it is being reinforced by the use within the same extract of words such as 'sang' used twice, 'meurtre', 'tuer', 'mourir'. At the same time, the prominence given to this iconic figure is not underlined so much through its repetition (a straightforward technique of foregrounding) but rather in an explicit reference to a tale about an ogress featured in a subsequent part of the narrative. The reader is led through into the mythical realm of North African or Maghribi oral tradition and is introduced to a particularly wicked *ghoula* who ate her own brothers and thus disallowed her motherly, nurturing function. A parallel may be drawn between this story and that of Nedjma and her lovers from a narrative point of view which justifies the symbolic value of both the ogress and Nedjma and their alternative meanings: if the *ghoula* stands in allegorical terms for Nedjma, the young woman is surely a kind of ogress. The story of Nedjma indicates so far that she exercises a fatal attraction over the young male characters which destroys their friendship (another hint about her evil power). The brotherly solidarity Rachid, Mustapha, Lakhdar and Mourad feel for each other[18] at the

18. Brotherhood should be understood in larger ethnic and cultural terms as the practice of endogamy that made men cousin-brothers. An interesting account of the impact of endogamous and patriarchal traditions in the creation of male bonding and this notion of brotherhood within a culture of machismo is offered by the classic work of Germaine Tillion on Mediterranean societies in The Republic of

beginning of the narration soon dissolves as they become fierce rivals in the race to win the young woman's heart. The rivalry between them undermines their political struggle. The continued disappointment generated by the quest for Nedjma produces deep frustrations in the protagonists and this sense of failure is exacerbated by the dominant colonial context, itself a source of inhibitions and blighted hopes. All these sexual, psychological and political frustrations merge on a higher literary level, that of the translation of the myth of Nedjma as Algeria. What was conceived of as a romantic pursuit of love soon turns into a lethal endeavour.

Nedjma is a classic story of impossible and/or destructive love. It is , in more philosophical terms, the struggle between life and death, between mind and body as well as the fight against the power of the flesh to attain purity of the spirit and of the idea of nation. But this process seems to require a mutilation of the feminine principle. Perhaps the following extract from the novel will show through this new sense of 'disenchantment' which the heroes start to develop at this late stage of their involvement with their

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Cousins: Women's Oppression in Mediterranean Society (London: El Saqi Books, 1983); this work first appeared as Le Harem et les Cousins (Paris: Seuil, 1966). This notion of `brotherhood` is also an expression of the special bond that united all Algerians and freedom-fighters during the war as they addressed each other as `brother` and `sister`. It helped create a spiritual bond between colonized Algerians and provided them with a sense of belonging in a world shattered by war. These expressions have survived in daily verbal usage.

beloved. The underlying hostility born of this awareness of a situation where they have wasted life and love in a fruitless quest for an illusory woman is rendered in the next extract from the novel and helps to contextualize the male antagonism referred to in an earlier chapter. It is interesting to note that this awakening is evoked in terms of 'exorcism', which bestows on the heroine witchy and harmful powers:

> C'est alors que lui reviendrait vaguement, comme une ironie exorcisante, le souvenir de la patrie perdue et de la femme fatale, stérile et fatale, femme de rien, ravageant dans la nuit passionnelle tout ce qui nous restait de sang. [...] Stérile et fatale, mariée depuis peu, en pénitence dans sa solitude de beauté prête a déchoir [...] Ils la voyaient déchoir [...]. Se consolant ainsi de la perdre.[19]

The hostility binds the men together against the object of their fall. To rejoice in her decline is now source of anticipated excitement and pleasure since they have been deprived of the joy of possessing her. The unbearable idea of losing her has been transformed into a comforting thought. Associations between femininity and danger are embedded then within this model of ambiguous femaleness embodied by the characterization of the magnetic Nedjma. The hostility she encounters from men is translated into a patriarchal revenge against an immoderate, independent female. It is therefore convenient to see her again as

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19. Kateb, Nedjma, p. 118.

an ogress whose death in the tales brings always the story to a much sought for climax and a sense of relief. The destructive implications of the heroine vis-a-vis manhood are thus portrayed by the analogy of the *ghoula* who has devoured her own brothers. In fact, it is suggested the fictional heroine is even more repellent and cruel than a folkloric ogress: she enjoys eating men's hearts for the sake of pleasure. The threat is located within her sexuality so she is a man-eater in emotional and sexual terms. Some expressions which clearly convey female sexual power as negative are 'femme fatale', 'femme de rien' 'ravageant. But these statements equating women with destruction are too many and the declarations of misogyny too forceful and numerous not to suggest the presence of a sexual fear within this characterization of the heroine. Nevertheless such context offers an interesting fictional case study of Algerian machismo, as it does not seem to be only a novelist's invention.

Kateb Yacine sets out to combine Maghribi myth with contemporary fiction. He uses a tale about an ogress elsewhere, in a short story entitled Un long rêve et un coq rôti,[20] and this intertextual incidence between the two narratives shows the functionality and purpose of the metaphor as well as its function in writing the female subject. It may be argued that the connotation was already there, inscribed in North

20. This short story is quoted by Arnaud in the second volume of her book Littérature Maghrébine, p. 580.

African folklore, to be read by alert readers. The motif of the *ghoula* structures the novel around the theme of sexual fear. In the short story mentioned above, the hero posthumously describes his death and the pleasure he enjoyed when cooked and then devoured by an ogress and her friends. He also describes how, as a tasty leftover reserved for new guests, he was left overnight, fighting off the vicious attacks of an army of ants attracted to him by the smells:

> Les fourmis s'infiltraient sous mes bras, m'obligeant a durcir mes fibres, au risque de décevoir les mêmes affamés, invités par mes soins a dévorer sans faute ces organes maudits par où j'avais été, je l'avoue, comestible en toute complicité... Un long rêve et un coq rôti, ainsi étais-je inscrit sur les tablettes de l'ogresse.[21]

The tale implies the theme of sexual voraciousness and that of the concomitant male fear of castration. The victim of the ogress refers to his sexual organs, which, he is delighted to say, were edible. Food consumption or the action of eating again enhances the sexual inferences within the text as well as the dangerous implications of the ogress in the present tale and another *ghoula*, Nedjma herself in the novel under study. The reading in question suggests that the male hero's feeling cannot be therefore dissociated from a deeply ingrained fear of impotence, translated by the loss of the penis eaten by the ogress. This

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21. Arnaud, Littérature Maghrébine, p. 580.

also means that the fear becomes, once enunciated, exorcized and the danger neutralized. It is clearly as a male fantasy that the tale functions.

The ogress is sometimes presented as an ugly, smelly creature while Nedjma is good-looking, gracious and elegant, scented with an Andalousian perfume. This physical dissimilarity between the two female characters is unified within the dual projection of Nedjma as both attractive in her outside appearance and threatening or repellent regarding her sexuality and treatment of men. From a traditional viewpoint, this dual image reflects ambiguous male attitudes toward women as either good, chaste and harmless on the one hand or bad, unruly and endowed with the power to castrate on the other hand.[22] The castrating threat that Nedjma projects may also be read within other narrative developments: the men's plight in pursuing her generates fears about their own sexual potency. In this light, she appears truly as a 'castrating bitch'.[23] The male obsession with this Delilah is only parallelled by the outstanding prominence bestowed on

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22. This dichotomous picture of women is mentioned again in the final chapter. It is also part of the parallel drawn in the previous chapter between the Arabian princess and the *ghoula*.

23. Expression borrowed from the terminology used by Karen Armstrong in her work on women suspected of witchcraft in the European medieval times. the author noted the closeness of terms such as witch and bitch, the former having the power to render men impotent through the use of special creams and the latter having the power to make men feel sexually inadequate.

her. This concern is disclosed in their narrative voices as they seem to continuously unravel the same paradigm.

So, Kateb's classic heroine is conceived of as a literary paradigm that highlights the construction of sexuality and femininity in relation to an historical context. But the present characterization, though charged with some implication for feminism, is strangely contrasted with the erasure from the novel of Nedjma as a central character and as a narrative voice in a novel narrated by several male protagonists. It may be deliberate on the part of the author to project the heroine as mysterious, evanescent, enigmatic and inaccessible, a 'Salammbô'[24] in his own words, or perhaps to stress her deeper meaning as a 'symbol'. The latter will be a strategic device for 'Othering' women and making them passive recipients of male representations of womanhood. It may be argued then that reading women as symbols is a textual and sexual strategy which helps to de-realize and de-sexualize them, uncovering repressive notions of the feminine within a male public discourse. It underlines the authority embedded in a patriarchal culture as it

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24. See an English translation of a novel by the French artist Gustave Flaubert's novel, Salammbô (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977). Interestingly, Flaubert himself was influenced by the Oriental woman in creating the character of Salammbô. As argued elsewhere, there is an interesting exercise of intertextuality operating between various Orientalist literary treatments of the Eastern female. But the present example reinforces the notion of an Orientalizing process of women by indigenous male writers.

writes off non-conventional models of womanhood and eschews the reality of their sexuality. As a result, this authority, also invested in the artist himself, denies a speaking self to challenging female figures and excludes women altogether from the mainstream of fiction.

Nedjma stands for a myth of disaster and death.[25] On one rare occasion, she speaks in a direct voice and her words are, in that respect, prophetically threatening:

> Ils m'ont isolée pour mieux me vaincre, isolée en me mariant. Puisqu'ils m'aiment, je les garde dans ma prison. A la longe, c'est la prisonnière qui décide.[26]

But the negative connotations attached to her personality are read mostly in the men's descriptions of her and in their obsessive monologues as they voice their frustrations and fantasies about hers. In their rhetorical representation, she is 'perte',[27] their 'mauvaise étoile'[28] or 'plante vénéneuse',[29] 'l'avant-goût de déboire'[30] and so forth. In addition, many expressions of admiration for her beauty can hardly

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25. Arnaud, Littérature Maghrébine, p. 423.

26. Kateb, Nedjma, p. 67.

27. Kateb, Nedjma, p. 188.

28. Kateb, Nedjma, p. 188.

29. Kateb, Nedjma, p. 178.

30. Kateb, Nedjma, p. 179.

conceal male hostility and ambiguous stance towards her. So, she is a helpless Cinderella, a virgin, a little girl and an almeh, all at once.[31] Later in the narration, Rachid looks at Nedjma while she is enjoying a bath. His admiration for her is limitless but, again, his use of hyperboles and analogy indicate the antagonistic perception of women in such fictional discourse. She is 'un parfum'[32] but also 'une vipère'.[33] Reference to the mythology of the snake, an overtly sexual motif, is a constituent of most cultural archetype. In the novel, it is recurrent one.

In this text, woman is either presented as life giver if she is passive, or death bearer is she is an active and erotic character. But, this feminine/feminist threat, contained within the novel and in its register of death, is counteracted by the occurrence of an important narrative moment: Nedjma's return to the ancestral place, the Nadhor.

4. 4. Resurgence of an Indigenous Patriarchy

Before her downfall, the young woman has one more opportunity to enjoy her freedom and her power over men. During the scene where she is portrayed taking a bath, her powers suggest, by the sheer force of the

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31. Kateb, Nedjma, p. 78.

32. Kateb, Nedjma, p. 138.

33. Kateb, Nedjma, p. 138.

tension, the approaching climax. It is noon and Nedjma is washing her body in an old cauldron placed outdoors in the middle of a sunny field. The eyes of two men focus on this scene: Rachid and a Black man from the tribe of Keblout named prophetically Si Mabrouk (in Arabic, the name means 'the blessed one'). But while the bath is interpreted as a ritual of purification from her previous promiscuous life, the presence of the two 'voyeurs', reinforced by another male signifier, the 'masculine sun',[34] renders it ambivalent. At the end of her ablutions, Nedjma is expected to step out of the cauldron having rid herself of her 'dépouille de vipère'.[35]

The narrative role of Si Mabrouk is multifaceted. What he introduces is theme of blackness and an element of strangeness. This is equated with an older, more 'authentic' indigenous manhood. His symbolic historic status is necessary at this stage of the narration to solve the problem of a dubious identity framed by colonization and so far conveyed by the shaky characterization of the other male characters. He represents, in metaphysical terms, the victorious breakthrough of a patriarchy whose roots reach back into history, into the depth of the African soil, and the collective memory. He stands, on another level, for the realm of the unconscious where the most

34. This is how the novelist describes the sun, making it into a third male character and another `voyeur`.

35. Kateb, Nedjma, p. 138.

intimate drives of the human psyche, stripped of all artifices, run free from ethical, moral or ideological ties and restraints. His alleged madness, read as a collapse of the frontiers between the rational and the irrational, or between dream and reality, marks a positive upsurge of the forces of darkness into the open world and endows him with esoteric knowledge. He is a kind of sorcerer entertaining a privileged relationship with the forces of nature and holding the key to secret powers and places. Because of this, and through his 'madness',[36] he enjoys the status of a holy leader in his community, where he comes to represent an authentic historical voice and where he stands for spiritual fatherhood, thus resurected from the the passing of history. In view of the authority conferred to him by the different values he embodies, he feels called upon to overpower the young woman and redeem her. Therefore, he stands for pre-colonial Algeria and the voice of the forefathers. His blackness conveys the original and purest form of a collective memory and of a national identity, forged in a remote past when communal life and values were unspoilt by a White colonial intrusion. The anti-imperialism which may be read in such a novel is evident in this assumption about Si Mabrouk as a character endowed with positive meanings and a content of power. In contrast, the

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36. Replaced within indigenous perceptions of this illness, madness becomes associated with the sacred: the sufferer is seen as possessed by spiritual and magical powers.

other male protagonists project images of doubt and uncertainty and of an identity in crisis. They reflect a transitional phase of masculinity that Si Mabrouk, for his part, firmly re-establishes at last by reclaiming its legitimacy and ties with an authentic ancestry. It is noteworthy that the reading of the novel so far points out a fundamental battle between various models of maleness but, more fundamentally, between principles of patriarchy and matriarchy. Nedjma appears to embody (especially through intertextual inferences)[37] the archetype of the Mother while Si Mabrouk represents the patriarch who appears to restore the old order; he conveys the ideal and unambiguous archetype of 'the Wise Old Man', the Father, that is, the Self. This suggests that the concept of Self in the Arabo-Islamic context is an essentially phallicized principle.

From the moment he snatches her away, Si Mabrouk imposes on her a constant watchfulness. From the picture of her naked body, proudly and voluptuously stretching itself in the glorious sunshine, the narrative evolves in a movement similar to that of the falcon as it falls on his prey in tighter and reductive circles before it finally closes its claws on it. This historic instance of the 'return' is a significant

37. In other works by Kateb, she re-appears in the role of a mother, the use of her name in these texts suggesting the intertextual link between her and other heroines. So, the assumptions which are only alluded to in metaphysical terms within the present reading of Nedjma, become self-evident elsewhere.

structural development in the story which breaks away from earlier narrative parts about a triumphant Nedjma and the motif of sexual fear that she instigates. From this point onwards, this female character no longer dictates the narrative events but becomes their plaything. After having enslaved men, she is now their prisoner and victim. The matriarchal crux inherent in her power dissolves under the thrust of a resurgent patriarchy, first represented by the decadent Si Mokhtar and the militant Rachid and later by a more esoteric and spiritual character, Si Mabrouk.

This return to the original clan is therefore understood as a restoration of history and a restitution of identity. Nedjma is reinstated as an embodiment of the recovery of land and consciousness. The old Si Mokhtar is aware of such premise as he says that now that Nedjma has returned to the native village 'le sang de Keblout retrouvera sa chaude, son intime épaisseur'.[38] Modesty of appearance is required by her new image to reflect the passive role assigned to her by patriarchy: firstly of guardian of tradition and, secondly, considering the background of nationalist struggle, that of custodian of the liberationist spirit and values. Her body remains a symbolic battlefield on which patriarchy rewrites its history and reclaims its rights. In view of this role, she has to remain tradition-bound as the functions assigned to her ensure

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38. Kateb, Nedjma, p. 130.

the continuity of the life-cycle. She is reduced at the closure of the novel to a shapeless figure under a veil, a kind of '*mutahajibat*' or in more poetical terms, a mere 'glimmer of autumn'.[39]

Finally, in spite of the non-linear structural development of this novel and its revolutionary use of language, which might suggest the non-conformist and radical nature of the novelist's intellectual position, the text effectively restores an authoritarian order.

Sexual segregation, apparently so typical of Muslim society, will be looked at in the forthcoming chapter from a radically different angle. We will not accept the Bouhdibian identification of Muslim discourse nor the delivery of womanhood by other male endeavours, whether poetical or political. Novel possibilities to read women are brought about by modern feminist voices which call into question the role and definition of gender roles in Arabo-Muslim societies. Sexual segregation is examined as a process which is formative of gender hierarchy, underpinning women's oppression rather than their liberation as male literature (critical and fictional) has so far tried to establish.

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39. Kateb, Nedjma, p 183. My own translation.

PART TWO

EXPLORING FEMINIST CRITICISM: THE WORK OF SUBVERSION

CHAPTER FIVE

WOMEN'S LITERARY VOICES: BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

As a preliminary step in the study of feminism, it is useful, at this stage, to consider aspects of North African and Middle Eastern fiction by women; to trace the development of a new female identity and the forging of an increasingly assertive and independent voice within the mainstream of literature. The literary development of such as voice positively impacts upon the feminist work, both practical and theoretical, already under way in other spheres of knowledge and writing as well as it indicates the extent of the challenges that women still need to confront. Furthermore, the domain of fiction and the particular process of literary writing can show in unequivocal terms the dichotomization of women's struggles and voices - but also of the socio-cultural forces shaping their lives - between tradition and subversion.

To explore the early artistic manifestations of a female voice and to follow its development while trying to determine its contours - as they emerge from the scattered achievements of various writers in a number of countries, for the purpose of construing a tradition, is an important task for an overall appraisal of feminist

theory and praxis. It is, however, fraught with difficulties because of the fragmented literary discourse it opens up. Nevertheless, feminist critics have engaged with this, both in literary and the non-literary fields and have also examined the role of women in fictional works produced by male novelists and poets.

5. 1. Working Within a Tradition of Female Subversion

It is often noted by critics that women have frequently tended to be precursors, behind the introduction of new structures and forms of writing in fiction and poetry. Reading the literary history of women highlights effectively those moments during which important changes have occurred, fostering renewal within older and more established textual forms and traditions. This tendency helped initiate new fictional discourses within the mainstream of literature in the Arab region and to push forward its threshold of experimentation. This section aims to provide a brief account of some innovative aspects by which literature by women has worked towards an undermining of male authority and the social/cultural status-quo. This female tradition seems to be characterized by a pervasive element of subversiveness and resistance, manifested in different ways, but with some consistency and resilience throughout the literary history of the so-called Eastern woman. This subversiveness is often expressed in thematic, textual or methodological devices which do not appear in

current forms of establishment male writing. Sometimes, this is tacitly conveyed within the subtext or the structure of the work, that is, covert or expressed more directly through the self-declared intention of the author to challenge and call for freedom, whether sexual, social or political, with the intention of destroying the old order. This desire sometimes transcends the literary framework as it propels writing into spheres of expression that cannot be conveyed by language alone. This assertion which indicates the possibility of using writing as a transgressive device, yet shows the limitation of language (which is, often, that of a male colonizer) to convey the rupture which runs as an undercurrent within women's fictional and poetical voices.

In this chapter, however, the attempt at assessing the subversiveness embedded in the literary voices of women is necessarily brief as it aims at providing a broad review of a literary tradition and asserting its existence rather than being a close analysis of the structures of particular works of fiction.

5. 1. 1. Female Voices Within the Great Classical Tradition

Methods of conveying revolt vary, but one can determine contours of rebellion in the female tradition going back as far as the poet El Khensa[1] in the seventh

1. See Elizabeth Warnock Fernea and Basima Quattan Berzirgan (eds.), Middle Eastern Women Speak (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977), p. 1.

century who could withstand male rivalry, respond adequately to men's biased criticism and become one of the most authoritative voices in the poetry of her time. Needless to say, our concern with the tracing by female critics of such literary endeavours (whether from the remote or more recent past) which escaped oblivion, destitution and even destruction, highlights the visibility of women within history and calls for a new classification and definition of these works, so far featured only in anthologies written and edited by male scholars.

In the history of the Arab world, women's voices manifested themselves in ancient times. For instance, in the desert of Arabia in a noble nomadic tribe was the poetry of aforementioned El Khensa, a strong character who, in the late pre-Islamic period and during early Islam, established a voice for women in classical Arabic poetry. She is best remembered for the famous eulogies she wrote on the occasion of her brother's death. Perhaps the context of the period was an important factor in fostering female talents and encouraging women, as they enjoyed, according to some studies on pre-Islamic society, relative freedom of movement. That she later witnessed the rise of Islam to which she converted does not prevent her classification as a writer belonging to the *Jahiliya*[2] period, especially in view of the quality

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2. The Arabic word *Jahilaya* literally means ignorance, in contrast to the enlightenment which was brought upon the Arabian peninsula by the advent of the new religion, Islam.

of her work which bears the marks of the great classical tradition which preceded a new tradition in poetry, not yet adulterated by Islam's negative position towards this form of art. But the talent that she displayed while reciting poetry, sitting among a predominantly male audience, was too much for some of her critics who, in spite of their admiration for her talent, insisted on labelling her the best 'female poet', an assessment of her art against which she calmly and promptly reacted by giving herself the title of the 'best poet', that is, among both males and females.[3]

Later, during the 11th century (from A. D. 1023 to 1031), a prominent female writer emerged in the court of Cordoba, Wallada Bint Al-Mustakfi, the daughter of the Caliph of Cordoba.[4] She initiated a strong voice in classical Arabic literature and an early women's revolt against oppressive traditions and customs. For instance, she discarded the veil, a daring act in Andalusian society - particularly in the case of aristocratic women as they were expected to set role models for other women. Her lifestyle was certainly 'revolutionary' for the time as she behaved as a virago, interacting freely with men, holding a salon which soon became a literary centre where poets and writers gathered to recite poetry, play and listen to music, displaying a sense of fashion, judged outrageous even by today's standards, as her dresses were

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3. Fernea (ed.), Middle Eastern women, p. 4.

4. Fernea (ed.), Middle Eastern Women, p. 67.

embroidered with verses about love and desire.[5] She was surely a feminist prototype in many respects and the fact that her upper class origin allowed her to break with impunity the rules of social behaviour as assigned to women in her society is not sufficient to explain the extent of her subversive stance; other women in the court were happy to abide by the norm and remain charming and discreet according to the genteel tradition. Another element of scandal could be added to this portrait of Wallada as she is also well remembered for her relationship with one of the most prestigious poets of the Andalusian period, Ibn Zaydoun, a relationship that seemed to have inspired them both with their greatest love poetry. Wallada's own particular position in classical poetry derives not only from the great literary talent she had, but also from the new poetical discourse she established within, and in contrast to, the refined and elegant poetry of the Andalusian era. Her work was described by contemporaries, as crude and 'obscene satirical verse',[6] because of its blunt and unambiguous treatment of love and sexual attraction. The new poetry significantly disrupted the genteel poetical tradition of her day by introducing verses, articulated by a woman's speech, about the power of desire. The fact that the originator of such allegedly controversial and immoral poetic lines was a woman (and from the best of homes)

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5. Fernea (ed.), Middle Eastern Women, p. 68.

6. Fernea (ed.), Middle Eastern Women, p. 72.

attracted even more scorn and uproar. But Wallada had successfully made her 'revolution' in Arabic poetry and galvanized its content with invigorating themes and symbols, introducing in the process a powerful Arab female voice in the history of art.

These isolated cases of women (El Khensa, Wallada and many others who cannot be presented here) who were able to shake off the chains of seclusion and the shackles of stifling traditions so that they could rise among the outstanding literary figures of their time are remarkable precisely because of their unusual character in a society typically marked by conservatism in its treatment of women. But the implications of research into original literary voices of the past initiated by women seem to posit some questions which need to be discussed by feminist critics today. For instance, how women like Wallada Bint el Mustakfi and El Khensa could rise to great levels of fame and recognition for their talent within their respective societies, considering the force of seclusion that characterized female lives for centuries. One explanation certainly lies in the social background of these writers who were often from the upper classes, a situation which allowed them to escape the stifling conditions of life which crushed other women, benefit from some learning and devote their attention to creative activities if they wished to. In that sense, they were able, if they had any talent, to cultivate it, some of them to the point of competing with men. The importance of this question was further debated by

Bezirghan who, in Women in the Muslim World,[7] wondered if Wallada, for instance, was 'atypical of her time?'[8] She asks, speaking about Wallada: 'does her life suggest that not all Muslim women were subjugated, veiled, and sequestered?'.[9] She finds the answers which are largely male determined, inconclusive.

Conclusive or not, the tradition of female seclusion was, in the case of Wallada again at least, already firmly established during the reign of the Omeyad, the dynasty prevailing during part of the Andalusian period, which makes the existence and rise of women such as Wallada, in spite of their upper class origins, exceptional cases rather than a norm or an indication of a more common phenomenon of female power. But is not that isolation one of the factors that make their intellectual contributions to the development of literature perhaps even more substantial and disruptive?

Nevertheless, whether outstanding female figures, such as Wallada, El Khensa and others were predominant or not should not hamper the argument proposed here about the existence of a scattered feminine voice within the literary history of the region, which seems to have often worked against the grain and resisted, throughout the centuries, a powerful male tradition. These women contributed in an innovative - and subversive - way to

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7. Fernea (ed.), Middle Eastern Women, p. 73.

8. Fernea (ed.), Middle Eastern Women, p. 73.

9. Fernea (ed.), Middle Eastern Women, p. 73.

the reshaping of the literature of their time, and indirectly, in questioning a male dominated world which unalterably denies them access to the outside world and to means of expression.

5. 1. 2. Appropriating Poetical Forms: 'Eulogy'

Eulogy represents another transgressive device. This poetical genre constituted from the time of El Khensa (and even before that) a typically feminine tradition. The critic Margot Badran suggests that studies centring on eulogy 'can be seen to constitute the foundation of a tradition of Arab women writers'.[10]

Perhaps this tradition (especially for Middle Eastern artists such as El Khensa in the remote past and the Lebanese May Ziyada in the 20th century) indicates a traditional belief in the nurturing power of women and their stronger bonding with emotional issues such as death and bereavement. Women are expected to mourn the dead in special celebrations, heal and comfort. Such belief in female spiritual and emotional power is deeply entrenched in Arabo-Muslim psyches and traditions. The eulogy, associated with these beliefs, thus appears as a genre more suited to women and tailored to their social roles. Indirectly, the practice of eulogy, which could then appear as a textual opportunity for reproducing a traditional view of femininity, eventually gave women, on

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10. Margot Badran and Myriam Cooke (eds.), Opening the Gates: a Century of Arab Feminist Writing (London: Virago Press, 1990), p. 239.

the contrary, the possibility to monopolise the genre and appropriate it as a female tradition which channels original voices. Consequently, one can detect a subversive pattern in the manipulation of the genre. Through the manipulations it allowed and adaptation of its content, eulogy thus becomes a significant textual mode within the literature by women since the practice concentrates on the eulogizing of other women. It has become a device for expressing solidarity with fellow female artists, and other women as well, through the exploration of the eulogized author, a review of her contribution to the literary field. Beyond this particular artist, it serves to express admiration for female initiatives and courage and to point out the lack of adequate assessment of their achievements by the scholarly establishment. So it works indirectly as a means for women to praise each other and break the confinement of the female literary voice, thus re-affirming the bonds of sisterhood and undermining the ghettoization of the literature by women.

The work of May Ziyada shows evidence of the appropriation of the eulogy form by women which made it possible to invest a writing space and transform it into a female genre. She used the eulogy to write about other female writers, assess their art and their contribution to literature and by doing so helped to keep their memory alive. When she eulogized the Syrian poet Warda El Yaziji, during a talk given to a female audience, her words revealed the significance of eulogy for female

narrative art and for the formation of a typically female literary tradition:

> I have only time to indicate in passing my esteem of what women from earlier generations have done to open up the way for us. I say: 'open the way', even though all they did was to put up a signpost at the threshold of unknown territories.[11]

In this attempt at converting tradition into a female space and investing it with the power to raise consciousness as the example offered by May Ziyada shows, the genre is exploited as a pro-feminist act.

5. 1. 3. Initiating New Literary Movements

Similarly, one can find in the initiative of modern writers, such as the Iraqi poet Nazik el Malaika,[12] a renewing of the course and content of poetry, in particular in her introduction of free verse in Arabic classic poetry in an attempt to liberate its rigid patterns. The movement for freeing poetry is translated into a will to free society itself from sclerosis and its treatment of women and from conditions which stifle creativity and innovative enterprise. It is an attempt at overcoming the past and working for the future, something well conveyed by the revolution undergone by poetry itself as an expression of life and it is significant that the renewal is a female initiative.

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11. May Ziyada, 'Warda al-Yaziji' in Opening the Gates, ed. by Badran, p. 240.

12. Fernea (ed.), Middle Eastern Women, p. 233.

It was also a woman who introduced fiction to the Middle East. This is yet another moment of renewal which needs to be interpreted as a rupture with traditional literary conventions. The emergence of the novel is currently attributed to the Egyptian writer Haykal whose novel Zeinab appeared in 1914. But modern feminist critics suggest that the beginning of fiction in the Arab world goes back to the publication in 1906 by a New York publisher of a novel by the Lebanese Afifa Karam.[13]

Woman as initiator of change is also to be found in the emergence of the novel of French expression indigenous to North Africa during the colonial era.[14] It was introduced by Algerian female writers who were among the new intellectual elite whose rise coincided with a new phase of nationalist activism, immediately after the end of the Second World War. This was yet another disruptive movement in the generic development of literature as reflected in what appears as a line of female literary expression. The history of fiction in the Maghreb offers one such thread as it unravels into a female textual tradition, recovered from ancient times. So, again, it seems that it is women who open the mainstream of poetry and fiction to new experiences and horizons. The Maghribi novels written in the early forties by female authors were significant, considering that women's lives were constrained and stifled by

13. Mohammed Kacimi, 'Femme, Arabe, Ecrivain', Le Monde, 2 May 1992, p. 26.

14. Evelyne Accad, Veil of Shame, p. 49.

indigenous customs and colonization. It was a rigid life within the walls of the harem, and the majority of women were denied education and access to the outside world. The rise in such conditions of a literature by women was an important victory against adversity, even if the new writers were from relatively open and materially privileged backgrounds compared to most of their sisters. The fact that such novels were expressing, in the language of the European male occupier, a typically Algerian cultural reality, articulating women's experience and therefore claiming a pan-Arab female identity beyond the linguistic, colonial and social constraints, endows them with some power. They simultaneously subverted a dual source of oppression, that of one's own master and that of a foreign intruder. Although these early novels by women from the Maghreb dealt insufficiently with the larger political context, this does not undermine the subversive force contained in their message about patriarchal authority. Writing permitted a female literary expression to emerge in the Maghreb, and is testimony to life in the harem at that specific moment.

The subversive text par excellence and the most virulent attack on cruel social mores of this early period of Maghribi female textuality is an autobiographical account by Zoubeida Bittari O Weep, my Muslim Sisters.[15] Her cry still resonates throughout the

15. Zoubeida Bittari, O, mes soeurs musulmanes, pleurez! (Paris: Gallimard, 1972).

fiction of the Arab world: 'it was necessary to reach all the way to the lowest depths of sadness to find the courage to cry out: 'Me? I exist!'[16] Her book was published after Algerian independence, and was immediately banned in her native country where it was considered part of anti-Algerian propaganda on the part of an ex-colonial power. It was even suggested that it was the French family to whom Bittari turned in her despair (when thrown out of her own home by her father) who wrote the book. Bittari castigated the system and revealed the presence of a female resistance in the harem and self-awareness among literate women of the period. She opens her diatribe with the following words: 'I pity my Muslim sisters with all my heart, those who are still bent under the yoke. I hope the day may come when they too will emancipate themselves'.[17]

Although Bittari's painful account of her life indicates her resistance and awareness of her subordinate status as an Algerian woman living in an Arabo-Muslim society, it was not sufficiently radical to bring about further discernment of colonization to which her family and her country were subjected. A more radical sense of identity was required before the political issue of colonization was brought into writing. The historical context, at that time, did not allow the development of such identities, at least not yet. Later, with the rise

16. This extract is borrowed from Accad's Veil of Shame, p. 56.

17. Zoubida Bittari, 'The Voice of Happiness' in Opening the Gates, ed. by Badran, p. 295.

of a new political consciousness in the novel and the strengthening of the writing self, literary women managed to look beyond the harem. Considering how rigidly gender roles were defined at that time, Bittari's subversion of the social order becomes self-evident. However, for most of these authors, their appropriation of the colonizer's language was in itself disruptive enough (it was translated into a move to 'join the enemy') and contradicted the norm which excluded women from using any linguistic means to express themselves. It is a significant fact therefore to find women as the first French speaking Maghribi authors. It means in addition that these women were not emulating intellectual men. Rather, they were 'opening the road' to the male intellectual elite.

5. 1. 4. Recovering Lost Voices: Oral Literature

However, the most truly subversive line is to be found in the age-old oral tradition, where an essentially feminine voice has been perpetuated over centuries. This tradition has provided a refuge in which female identity survived by exploiting a rich cultural heritage, drawing sustenance from folkloric specificities buried in local songs, poetry, proverbs, charades and legends but also in traditional crafts such as embroidery, tapestry and pottery. All these activities offered women outlets for their creativity and for their identity through the formation of female solidarity network. Oral literature can have a more far reaching social effect in conveying

female joy and resentment than written literature (enjoyed only by the literate). It is effective in undermining oppressive traditions and eroding the authority of the patriarchal family. It certainly provides a channel for secluded females to voice their frustrations, and a means to share the burden of domesticity and child rearing, relieve the harshness of confinement and thus sustain female bonding and forge a chain of solidarity. The importance of an oral tradition working as a liberating discourse and an enduring transgressive mode of expression relates to Arabo-Muslim societies as a whole and represents the common heritage of all women across the Mediterranean. In North Africa, the oral tradition is particularly significant in the lives of rural women (for whom it represents the only access to Culture). It is presently exploited by academics as a serious trend of research. Algerian feminists appropriately call the women who exploit this tradition 'intellectuelles de l'oralité',[18] stressing the scholarly dimension of the artistic oral enterprise. For Assia Djebar, the post-colonial break with an ancient tradition of oral literature as a mode of expression for generations of women in the past has meant a rupture with the mother figure as she used, quite literally, to 'embody' such a tradition and, by transmitting it to the daughter, she averted the historical discontinuity in the

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18. See an article by Marie Souibes, 'Intellectuelles de l'oralité: la culture féminine au quotidien', Présence de Femmes, (1984), pp. 80-85.

development of this female voice. And in the novelist's words, the bond between women mediated by the channel of oral culture is expressed in the following terms:

> Songs, poems. We heard the sound of the mother, a woman without body or an individual voice, but who speaks eloquently in the asexual tone of a collective voice. In this time when defeat seemed to be frozen tragically, a search for models of rebirth began. Some could be traced to this sort of huge nourishing womb where mothers and grandmothers, in the shade of patios and huts, preserved the cultural memory.[...] Illiterate narrators recounted battles lost in the last century, details of colors worthy of a Delacroix; the whispered voices of these forgotten women helped to weave our sense of Algerian history.[19]

The history of oral literature requires evaluation and careful recording nowadays in order to be preserved from total oblivion. A valuable female tradition of creativity would be lost. Djebar focuses on the importance of reclaiming the indigenous female voices buried in this history - and which are now only a ' trace' - as part of the modern identity of women and therefore argues:

> A trace of this chorus can be faintly heard today, the remains of a culture of women who are slowly smothering themselves: the songs of young girls on terraces, the love quatrains of the women of Tlemcen, the magnificent funeral lamentations of the women of Laghouat - an entire literature that is becoming more and more rare.[20]

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19. Assia Djebar, 'A Forbidden Glimpse, a Broken Sound: extract from Women of Algiers in their Appartment' in Women and Family in the Middle East: New Voices of Change (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), ed. by Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, p. 347.

20. Assia Djebar, 'A Forbidden Glimpse', in Women in the Middle East, ed. by Warnock Fernea, p. 347.

Elsewhere, she outlines the importance of recovering the oral tradition as she introduced her translation of one of El Saadawi's novel with the following comment:

> I dream suddenly of the first origin - alas, lost, or perhaps to be found some day - of our women's literary tradition: 'shimmering of a lost murmur, of a happiness that - even today - people wanted to kill, because they first of all suppressed its words'.[21]

The reading of this heritage, translated into a written discourse, reveals an authentic female voice which expressed itself with surprising power, originality and freedom. It is necessary to read an extract of such textuality to evidence and appreciate the subversive force embedded in its structures and meaning. For instance, the following poem, part of a rich tradition of songs from the Berber mountains of the Maghreb, expresses a female desire, which cunningly subverts rigid boundaries, calling for complicity and secret sharing with another female, a 'sister' to whom the poet speaks about the joy and pain of her experience, expecting from her understanding and compassion:

> My sister, don't scold me.
> It's true, I shouldn't have slept in the shepherd's hut.

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21. Assia Djebar, 'Introduction to Nawal al-Saadawi's Ferdaous' in Opening the Gates, ed. by Badran, p. 392.

For you know, my sister, what happens in a shepherd's hut,
On a spring evening, with a young man.
Am I the only girl who ever spent the night
In a young man's arms, my sister?
You're telling me, my sister, that such lovely nights
are not worth the morning after.
Well, at least keep the secret, my sister.
Old Tamoucha knows all about those plants,
The plants which will soon deliver me from my trouble.
Nothing shows yet, you know.
Tamoucha has already bought the alum and resin
To make me a new virginity.
She's even promised to promote a marriage for me.
Do you believe it? To our dear cousin.
Tell me, my sister, will he make a good husband?
Oh, how would we survive against men
If we didn't have these tricks and smiles?

Women - deceivers - Oh, my cousin ![22]

The relevance and significance of oral literature in the present debate on gender and feminism is underlined by previous discussions of female characters in mythology and folklore such as the ogress.

5. 2. The Rise of the Feminist Novel

5. 2. 1. The Transitional Phase: Alienation and Identity

It was in a gradual and fragmented manner that a female voice emerged within the fiction of the Arab world, slowly pushing the female experience to the forefront. Broadly speaking, the development of modern

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22. Fernea (ed.), Middle Eastern Women, p. 128. This song, as indicated by the editor, who is also the translator, was recorded by René Euloge, with other songs, from an oral recital given by a Berber woman from Morocco, Mririda N'ait Attik; the anthology Les Chants de la Tassaout was later published (Casablanca: Maroc Editions, 1972).

Arab female fiction followed various stages which fall, from the viewpoint of a structural and thematic analysis, into two broad categories, although the work of some authors indicate a greater number of patterns.

The early part of Arab female writing concerned a handful of women who wrote against the odds in a male world where a woman's place is in the home, raising children and caring for her husband. Writing was certainly not seen as an activity women should 'waste their time with'. So the few woman who could read books or write prose and poetry were seen as indulging in idle activities and, interestingly enough, as acting in a subversive way. It is important to draw the context of this early writing as it meant that it was already an achievement of great significance that some women could write at all, considering the suspicion the educated female raises in her milieu and the amount of pressure and discouragement she encounters in fulfilling her desire to read and write. This early phase is characterized by specific features that mark the work within a female tradition of textuality. For it seems that themes such as cultural and personal alienation and female subservience are recurrent within the poetry and prose of writers whose experience of isolation and loneliness are thus reflected in their textual production, autobiographical or other. The Lebanese

writer Ethel Adnan sees these conditions as part of her 'growing up to be a woman writer in Lebanon'.[23]

From this position of alienation, the search for a female identity becomes the prominent concern around which fictional elements are textured. The need is stressed for the writer to be in control of her art, even if this entailed a rupture with one's kin, which the Palestinian poet, Fadwa Tuqan expressed with these words: 'I was forced into a breach with the society in which I was born'.[24] Tuqan's own 'journey through life was filled with the misery of acute emotional and intellectual struggles[25] as the case was - and is still today - with most of her fellow female authors. Most written compositions share the anguish that their authors suffered in a society which exerted a great deal of pressure on them. The tension created from such conflict sometimes benefited the process of creation, providing the fiction and the poetry with an edge of dramatic effect and a certain depth. What also forcefully emerges is the overall conflictual experience of being woman writers in Arab societies and the anguish associated with this.

In the Maghreb, the history of oppression, stemming both from indigenous structures and colonization made it

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23. Ethel Adnan, 'Growing up to be a woman writer in Lebanon' in Opening the Gates, ed. by Badran, p. 3-20.

24. Fadwa Tuqan, 'Difficult Journey - Mountainous Journey' in Opening the Gates, ed. by Badran, p. 32.

25. Fadwa Tuqan, 'Difficult Journey', p. 28.

more fundamental and dominant. In this respect, the case of literature by women in its first stages is a particularly interesting one, as it required a dual strategy of subversion and liberation, from the Arab patriarchal family and from a colonial legacy. In other words, female novelists were to develop a fiction that would challenge an unusually authoritarian setting. Djebar is the female novelist in North Africa whose development as a writer and woman illustrates the evolution of both Arab female authorship and womanhood. Her books also cover the various historical moments of most of Algerian recent history since the outbreak of revolutionary activity in the early fifties in which they are rooted. Women's fiction moved from depicting shallow, self-centred female characters to women who were awakened by the revolution which brought a 'taste of freedom' and with it a new awareness of women's potential for new roles.

Drawing on a Western tradition of representation and an Arabic and Islamic background, bicultural women in the past in Maghreb and Machrek have thus all contributed, through the evolution of their fiction towards increasingly committed goals at both the social and political levels, raising a new voice for women in literature. Djebar for instance argues in a rather melodramatic way:

> Young Arab women have unsuspected reserves of romanticism; too brutally thrown against men, they seldom regain their injured innocence. And their husbands will never know the exalted

> face of their adolescence. Only the dry look, barely touching, of submissive beast, of the weak.[26]

But in this transitional phase, the melodrama still has some significance: for such extracts from the novels of female writers already embody in telling fashion a new voice which discards the submissiveness and passivity and conveys instead instead the struggles, the anger and hopes of the female fictional characters. The quest for a female identity was well rendered by Djebar's fiction in her first trilogy written during the war[27] where the characterizing is of women as free individuals, involved in love affairs with men with whom they try to assess their personality and free will. The search for a specific gender identity seems to be the common underlying concern of most of this fiction. Nevertheless, it developed towards the treatment of less self-centred issues, increasingly immersing the writers and their characters in even more acute social and political conflicts. The embattled author wrote on the plight of the oppressed: Fadwa Tuqan sought the freedom of her Palestinian community in her poetry, Djebar fought the Algerian war with her novels and El Saadawi later

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26. Accad, Veil of Shame, p. 132.

27. Assia Djebar, La Soif (Paris: Julliard, 1957); Les Impatients (Paris: Julliard, 1958); Les enfants du nouveau monde (Paris: Julliard, 1962). There is an evolution in the fiction of this prolific novelist. Her modern fiction, which can be classified as feminist, where the female character and the writer herself seem to have achieved greater maturity and autonomy, is marked by a political *'prise de conscience'*. Her latest work published in English is A Sister to Scheherazade (London: Quartet Books, 19988).

resisted the unjust aberrations of the regime of Anouar Saddate in Egypt, suffering in the process arrest and imprisonment. The various struggles sharpened their self-awareness as the subordinate sex, as well as developing their political and social consciousness.

5. 2. 2. The Post-Colonial Phase: Reclaiming the Body

Again, it is women who, exploiting various veins of self-introspection and applying different strategies, revolutionized the content of fiction, by being the first authors to introduce the theme of women's sexuality into the mainstream of fiction. They broke taboos about the nakedness of the body and sexual desire - that is female sexual desire - and writing the body. The new sexuality, as depicted by women, is in contrast to the view presented beforehand by male authors, in which sexuality was the exclusive prerogative of males, women projected rather as compliant victims of their sexual greed and violence. The predilection shown by male writers for the character of the prostitute is perhaps the best endorsement of such an argument, as she appears, in male fiction, as the epitome of human debasement and suffering and the most dubious vision of womanhood.

The new approach to the female character, the quest for a sexual identity and rediscovery of the body, first appeared in the literature of women from the Maghreb. Specifically, it appeared in the fiction of Assia Djebar who also treated in a straightforward manner the topic of love relationships between a man and a woman, especially

in her post-colonial novels. Male literature, so far, did not treat fictional female characters in roles other than those of the mother, the wife, the widow, the old woman, the mother-in-law,, the prostitute. The words of Djebar sum up the stages of female literature as she says: 'a new, fresh discursive field is imperceptibly traced for other Arab women. A point for take off. A combat zone. A restoration of body'.[28]

In the Middle East, it is the story I Live, by the Lebanese writer Layla Ba'labaki (considered today a landmark of Arab literature) which, in 1958, shocked readers with its unambiguous treatment of female sexuality. For the first time in the fiction of the region, a woman is depicted as enjoying her body. The text was subversive to such an extent that it brought its author, at its publication, a court prosecution for offending public morality. As the case of Ba'labaki's prosecution bears out (since her attitude, as reflected by her fiction, dared to challenge morality and disrupt social order), writing by women had become more forceful and provocative. It was a revolutionary step for women's fiction and influenced even the literary canon of mainstream literature. Male authors started to emulate literary women by tackling more openly the theme of female sexuality, although their fiction still shows that men have not yet transcended stereotypical portrayals of women and their ambiguous attitudes towards love and

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28. Djebar, Introduction to Ferdaous', p. 387.

desire; they remain enmeshed in their fears of the 'new woman' as already projected by female fiction since the early fifties.

The subversion in these female texts in their portrayal of a revolutionary female subject, breaking with a tradition of male representation which dwelt on the picture of the all suffering and asexual female is reinforced. This 'new woman', in the guise of an independent character striving to assert herself through intellectuality and sexuality and who emerged in the feminist stage of this modern textuality was highly subversive. This projection of femininity set out to destroy the common - and largely male-determined - representation and characterization of women as voiceless, crushed by destiny and denied a fictional development. It also disrupted the linear development of structural narrative moments and denounced the role of patriarchal ideology in fostering female oppression. Indeed, an increasingly marked break from the traditional literary conventions of writing the female subject was achieved with the advent of a new wave of contemporary novelists during the last decade, notably novelists such as the Egyptian Nawal El Saadawi[29] and the Algerian Fettouma Touati.[30] They tend to address directly and

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29. See the following novels by Nawal El Saadawi: Woman at Point Zero (London: Zed Books, 1983); Memoirs of a Woman Doctor (London: Saqi Books, 1988); Two Women in One (London: Saqi Books, 1985); a collection of short stories, Death of an Ex-Minister (London: Methuen, 1987).

30. Fettouma Touati, Desperate Spring. A novel by another Algerian female novelist Aicha Lemsine entitled La Chrysalide (Paris: Editions Des Femmes, 1976) introduced in fiction the theme of

most effectively the subordination of women, social hypocrisy, male despotism, religious heresy and violence against women. The representation of women as featured by female characterization in these latest novels, those coinciding with a new wave of feminist activism in the area, shows women slowly and surely achieving sexual but also intellectual and political maturity. In other words, as Ramzi-Abadir put it, 'l'héroine marchant vers la majorité'.[31]

It can be said that such writing which coincided with the movement of independence, opened a new era in women's literary expression in the region under study as it marks the rise of a feminist tradition in the novel. The subversive voice finally managed to break down the walls of its confinement, 'rushing forth',[32] smashing the walls of the harem, asserting the rights of the female character for self-expression. The writing of the body has marked the transgression of new boundaries. Djebar describes this narrative in poetic terms as 'bodies of new women in spite of new barriers, which in the internal, interior language at once retracted and proclaimed, public and no longer secret find roots before rushing forth'.[33]

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romantic love and the problem of pregnancy outside wedlock. The family quietly accepts the situation and even shows support to the young woman.

31. Sonia Ramzi-Abadir, Femme Arabe au Maghreb et au Machrek: fiction et réalité (Algiers: ENAL, 1989), p. 179.

32. Djebar, 'Introduction to Ferdaous', p. 388.

33. Djebar, 'Introduction to Ferdaous', p. 388.

This process accompanies the emergence of the feminist heroine in the novels, marking, in a parallel movement, the beginning of a new fictional age. Most novels written by women in the last decade are already indicative of a feminist consciousness in the sense that they all display a general self-awareness of women's degraded status. The construction of an independent female identity became a reality for the first time through the critical eye that literature endorsing a new characterization introduced. Woman appears, at last, not just as an extension of man nor his plaything and object of pleasure but as an individual in her own right; and striving to achieve greater autonomy. The subversion of the system has thus become total and totalizing, endowed with authority and a new power. But female authors who managed to bring into the literary field the feminist struggle and raise the 'women question' in their societies have confronted many obstacles, personal, social and textual, yet these dilemmas helped shape their textuality in specific ways. Some of these problems and fictional limitations have not yet been resolved.

5. 3. Fictional Problems and the Female Text

5. 3. 1. Dual Conflicts: the Problem of Biculturality

For early North African female writers, the most obvious problem was biculturality, as most of them were educated in the colonial European schools and wrote in French, but lived a life steeped in Arabo-Muslim

traditions and social values. Their experience of reality was affected by the two cultures they had access to, the European and the Muslim/Algerian; this was a source of tension. Fadhma Amrouche, born in 1882 in a village located in the mountains of Kabylia in Algeria, experienced exile throughout her existence which she partly spent in her native country and elsewhere in Tunisia. This exile is also expressed in psychological and emotional terms as depicted in her memoirs, My Life Story: the Autobiography of a Berber Woman:

> I have omitted to say that I have always remained 'the Kabyle woman'; never, in spite of the forty years I have spent in Tunisia, in spite of my basically French education, never have I been able to become a close friend of any French people, nor of Arabs. *I remain for ever the eternal exile, the woman who has never felt at home anywhere.*[34]

Similarly, Djamila Debèche emphasized in her novel Aziza[35] a major, emotionally disturbing contradiction faced by bicultural women in the assertion of their identity. Her eponymous heroine discovers that biculturality is a severe handicap: it makes her socially unacceptable to both groups to which she might have a

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34. Fadhma Amrouche, My Life Story: the Autobiography of a Berber Woman (London: The Women's Press, 1988), p. 159. My own emphasis.

35. Djamila Debèche, Aziza (Algiers: Charras, 1947). In the same year, the writer published another outstanding novel, Leila (Algiers: Charras, 1947). Débèche also wrote critically on women's issues in newspapers and magazines, for instance, 'La femme et la condition juridique en pays d'Islam' in Dialogues, no. 7 (January 1964), pp. 20-35); 'La femme musulmane dans la société' in Contacts en Terre d'Afrique (1946), pp. 141-161.

claim to belong, and an acute feeling of pain is a result of this discovery.

The linguistic dichotomy and the position of the writers on the issue of biculturality evolved with the growth of female fiction towards maturity. While in the past, bilinguism was seen as a sign of dimophormism, conflict and alienation vis-a-vis oneself and towards one's social world, in post-colonial, modern fiction it is exploited and reflected more constructively as part of an individual consciousness and a collective women's memory. The problem however is not entirely resolved. First, in terms of readership, female writers using French are often mistrusted. The question of their cultural authenticity is recurrently formulated and posed with more urgency than is the case of male novelists.[36] Their situation, in this respect, is similar to that of any educated woman, outside the world of the novel, who aspires to be independent and break the traditional mould. It is therefore right to assert that for contemporary women writers, (including bilingual novelists) the contradictions are still numerous, varied and sometimes disheartening as the linguistic dichotomy is displaced and reflected at various levels and in the life and work of a number of Arab writers, reproduced in dual conflicts between modernity and tradition, misogyny and feminism, rebellion and submission, author and

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36. This argument is linked to the issue of female betrayal discussed in chapter three, in connection with the rise of modern women in post-colonial Algeria.

society, writing and being and being and the world. The consciousness raising which the writing process often seems to generate entails the unlocking of a social crisis for the author, whose sense of self clashes with a collective identity, hostile to individualism and personal initiative. For the woman as author, the experience of writing is therefore charged with contradictory emotions and dilemmas as the text gradually comes to stand as a new wall between her and her community, severing the last ties between herself and her kin and childhood memories where the only refuge was the mother, the little girl's natural ally who protects her daughter from the austerity of the father and sometimes the bullying of brothers. In fact, it is significant to read the spiritual separation of the female writer from her environment in terms of a the breaking of a bond with the mother-figure.

Furthermore, this discrepancy, stressed by the exacerbation of the sense of identity brought about by the feminist novel, is interpreted as a state of exile, textually rendered in the characterization of rebellious heroines whose fragmented voices constantly tackle the theme of rupture as a leitmotif. In the most romantic of these novels, the presence of an understanding partner seems to alleviate sometimes the feeling of sheer isolation and rootlesness. For instance, Fadwa Tuqan notices bitterly the social pressures of her milieu which requires certain behaviour. She states: 'ultimately, at the source of my struggle was a tradition whose laws and

customs constantly tested me [...] unless I pretended to be another person'.[37] And Ethel Adnan's words echoe those of Tuqan as she realizes that she is living in one world and her parents in another. She also experiences the symbolic split with the family circle as a wound: 'I felt cruel and alone'.[38]

5. 3. 2. The Predominance of Autobiography

Evelyne Accad, one of the first modern critics of Arab female literature, is a bicultural woman who, like most early critics of such literature (including male writers) uses a conventional and rather limited approach to the complex fictional world of Arab women which she reduces to a simplistic and sometimes even amateurish exercise in writing, marked by 'stylistic aberrations'[39] and deficiencies. Nevertheless, the critical attitude of Accad which has improved considerably over time as her latest works show (during the eighties), is interesting because it allows us to focus an important question: the lack of adequate assessment of the fictional work of women writers in North Africa and the Middle East.

The bulk of criticism against contemporary fiction in general (especially the fiction written between the fifties and the late seventies), focuses on its exploitation of autobiography. This has often been

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37. Tuqan, 'Difficult Journey', p. 29.

38. Adnan, 'A Woman Writer in Lebanon', p. 20.

39. Accad, Veil of Shame, p. 33.

judged as an essential weakness characterizing the world of fiction in most of the Third World. According to Accad, the confinement of fiction to the autobiographical indicates weaknesses, such as a lack of maturity and objectivity[40] in its narrative development and a 'preoccupation with the self'.[41] However, it may be argued that female textuality was able to establish an 'authentic' voice on the grounds that most of these works are fully or semi-autobiographical; the voices of both narrator and character(s) intermingling to channel the voice of the one unique speaking self, that of the novelist. Moreover, it is not surprising that autobiography has been dominant in fiction by women: authors have tended to find all material in the situations of women around them or in their own experiences with patriarchy and male authority. However privileged they may be, from the social or educational point of view, their lives remain circumscribed by the predominantly patriarchal norms of society and thus offer possibilities for literary prospection. As Accad remarks:

> The lives of North-African women would seem to provide 'natural' material for the novelist. Born into families where they are neither welcomed or cherished [...] and perpetually aware that they have neither respect nor freedom in society at large, the life-long struggle of the North-African woman has seemed to offer a splendid arena in which to view the

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40. Accad, Veil of Shame, p. 33.

41. Accad, Veil of Shame, p. 160.

> human spirit in its agonizing struggle for dignity and self-recognition.[42]

In Algeria, for instance, fiction was to become the outlet for the disillusionment felt by women following the war of liberation when the promises made by the revolution concerning female emancipation were not entirely kept. Considering the fact that the search of identity has been the natural concern of the dominated world during colonization, and also in post-independence times, expressed through the arts, is it not through autobiography that one can construe the quest for an individual and collective self in a convincing manner? Is not this form particularly significant for an assessment of a liberated voice in a new world? The female novelist in the Third World has only to look around her, at the political and social upheavals and her own inner conflicts, to discover a rich source of fictional material. What sense will her writing have if it totally ignores such an overwhelming reality? In contrast, the more 'sophisticated' genres adopted by Western female writers, ranging from surrealist writing to post-modern forms of expression and genres, such as the detective story and science-fiction seem an indulgence which novelists in the West can afford but are remote from the political and human tragedies still shaping the reality of men, women and children in the countries of the South. Moreover, fiction in countries

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42. Accad, Veil of Shame, p. 32.

of Europe and North America has had to respond to a market system which constantly pushed the novel towards new frontiers of prospection and experimentation. It is also important to bear in mind that autobiography and the diary form have attracted the attention of feminist writers and critics in the West and are now part of a feminist literary tradition. In the case of women writers elsewhere, notably in the Maghreb, who adopted autobiography before Western critics declared it a feminist genre, writing already contains the pre-text of its existence which is the struggle of its authors against their own social and intellectual confinement. That they would treat aspects of their oppression as fictional material seems to be a logical outcome of the emergence of their narrative voice and their writing selves. Criticism of the autobiographical mode like that of Accad operates intrinsically from a Europeocentric position. This Eurocentrism lies for instance in her appreciation of Assia Djebar's literary textuality in the light of a French female novelist's style Françoise Sagan, speaking about the 'Saganism' of Djebar.[43] So, this critical tradition uses Western criteria to judge a literary tradition circumscribed by different conditions and shaped by its own historical development. Autobiography in fact seems to be better suited to the need of female writers living in Arab societies who want to communicate their self-awareness than other modes.

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43. Accad, Veil of Shame, p. 157.

The criticism also reflects a dogmatic and reductive approach to fiction itself, one which restricts the functions of the imaginary and creativity. It also reproduces a male bias as autobiography was so far looked upon with some derision as being a subjective genre, therefore, a 'feminine' mode, like eulogy and therefore an 'inferior' mode of writing.

5. 3. 3. The Chasm Between Writing and Social Reality

The complexities displayed by women's works focus on the struggles of female characters to achieve social freedom and fulfilment, yet this writing, born of complexity, is frequently resolved or dissolved in a failure of nerve, a lack of verisimilitude. Sonia Ramzi-Abadir expresses concern about the chasm existing between the social reality of women and female representations in a narrative discourse in the following terms:

> Il existe un décalage non négligeable, tant au Maghreb qu'en Orient, entre le domaine littéraire et le contexte social, au regard du problème de la femme'. [...] Il tient à la spécifité de l'oeuvre romanesque. Elle doit intéresser plutot que convaincre.[44]

Evelyne Accad also points out a failure to portray effectively the plight of women within the aesthetic frame of the novel as she argues that 'from the male and female writers, one gets a certain sense of the unfulfilled and circumscribed lives women lead, but the

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44. Ramzi-Abadir, Femme Arabe, p. 86.

most violent aspects are missing'.[45] This argument raises a dilemma in the criticism of female literary writing. On the one hand, women are accused of being too 'autobiographical', drawing their stories only from real life; on the other hand, they are criticized for not making the portrayal of life very convincing. However, to insist on the tight association between life and reality, to insist that fiction should mirror life in detail and with great verisimilitude, is another critical position which stems from the Eurocentric, conventional and rather old fashioned approach that scholars adopt in their examination of Third World fiction at large, whether produced by male or female writers. The critical stance expresses a concern which is related to a European tradition of bourgeois social realism. The fiction/reality divide is not apprehended in its right context; and writers do not seem to be studied in their own right but often in the light of Eurocentric considerations, namely, how close Arab female textuality is to its Western counterparts.

One of the causes of the chasm between life and social reality according to Accad is class, who also expresses the issue in terms of the 'inability [of novelists] to engage in political and social problems because of the upper class background'.[46] Although she touches upon a contradiction within the writing of female

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45. Accad, Veil of Shame, p. 17.

46. Accad, Veil of Shame, p. 17.

novelists in the Arab world which is the class differential between them and women whose lives they are supposedly trying to depict, the argument remains debatable and certainly universal as it equally relates to other societies. Nevertheless, it is relevant to argue that socio-economic disparities are significant. They convey different realities and therefore should seek different fictional solutions. But it is noted that the class difference has not exempted these writers from suffering conflicts, caused by the overall social and cultural framing of femininity. To criticize a gap between author and social reality on the grounds of class is also problematic because it is based on the tacit assumption that middle classes everywhere are similar. The traditional middle class in the Maghreb for instance does not necessarily enjoy economic power which is nowadays in the hands of new social elites formed of members of the ruling class, military and political, known as the new 'barons'. And the middle class writers who wrote during pre-independence times, lived colonization as subjugated subjects.

5. 3. 4. Representations of Women in Male Fiction

It is important to examine briefly the role of the female character in male fiction. It reflects how a male-dominated society, through the voice of its intellectual elite, looks at women, and the predominant representations of women in fiction in general. This question is part of the problem still confronting women's

writing. Female writers need to challenge that negative vision of womanhood, entrenched in the Arab psyche, which is conveyed and expressed by male textuality. Since men retain power in society, there is a sense in which their fiction relates better to the position of women as framed by a dominant discourse. These texts are part of the formation of that patriarchal ideology by which women are confined to subservient roles; and therefore a discourse in which one can read off the structure of perpetuation of this oppression. The most disturbing aspect of the representation of women in male fictional writing lies in the contradiction which characterizes its conceptions of female roles. The most obvious example of this is offered by modern novelists such as Rachid Boudjedra, Kateb Yacine, Mohammed Dib, Ali Ghanem, Taha Hussein and others who all denounced the plight of women, inside or outside their novels, but who all found refuge, like some of their male characters, in the arms of a European woman. Uncovering 'the complex of the foreign woman',[47] we might say, seems to have prevailed, especially during the colonial era, within the male psyche. The most blatant manifestation of this complex, one indicative of these men's attitude towards the indigenous female, is the case of Boudjedra. In L'Insolation,[48] he used the theme of the French female as a positive character, who helps her Algerian lover to overcome his obsessions with

47. Ahlam Mosteghanemi, Algérie: femme et écritures (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1985).

48. Rachid Boudjedra, L'Insolation (Paris: Denoël, 1972).

a traumatic past by inducing him to talk about it in successive sessions where the therapy alternates with moments of passionate lovemaking. In contrast, the images of Algerian women who formed part of his childhood are negative. Moreover, as outlined in an earlier chapter, there is the image of woman as ogress in the portrayal of the nurse with whom the narrator, when staying in an asylum, had intercourse. In fact, most pictures of women in Boudjedra's fiction are controversial, revolving around the menstruation-blood which seems to haunt the narrator as a permanent female wound. These images of women also are part of a traditional viewing of femininity: they are depicted as brainless, devious and promiscuous (like the step-mother in La Répudiation)[49] or fatalistic, superstitious and helpless (like the mother in the same novel). What seems to lurk within the layers of his narrative is a deep-seated misogyny which contradicts the self-declared position of the author on the problem of women in Algerian society. Another writer who repeatedly expressed his sympathy with the situation of women in his country, only to exploit their specific experience for fictional ends, is Ali Ghanem. His novel A Wife for my Son[50] won universal acclaim, and provided the author with the opportunity to spread his ideas on the subject of the

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49. Rachid Boujedra, La Répudiation (Paris: Denoël, 1978).

50. Ali Ghanem, A Wife for my Son (Chicago: Banner Press, 1984). The novel was translated from the French: Une femme pour mon fils (Paris: Editions Syros, 1979).

Algerian woman in a number of countries around the world, through the novel itself and the film that was made out of it afterwards. The views expressed by his narrator claim to denounce the fate of injustice lived by the Algerian woman. There is, for instance, the story of the young narrator, also the main protagonist, who describes how, one night, he crept to the bed of his middle-aged aunt and raped her. There is the story of another rape, occurring on the wedding night of another male character, a selfish and insensitive husband whose wife was traumatized by her wedding night. He travels to Paris where he suddenly experiences happiness and tenderness in the arms of a French prostitute he meets one night in the streets of the capital. The experience leaves him wondering about the extent of that woman's warmth, in contrast to the coldness and frigidity of his own wife. Nowhere in the text of A Wife for my Son is there a protofeminist stance on the part of the male characters, rather they all seem to adopt traditional attitudes to women. It is true that the strongest message of the novel lies in its description of the lack of communication between the sexes. Yet the narrator himself loses credibility in the eyes of the readers, after the scene of the rape. The rather positive stance of the male character towards a prostitute is understandable if one bears in mind the fact that she is first perceived by her client as a French female. The latter is endowed with positive connotations in Arab male fiction, as argued earlier; and usually become even mote

outstanding in view of the contrasting figure of the indigenous female that often accompanies such female characterizations. She introduces in the narrative the character of the prostitute which dominates the fiction by men and the combination of such a structure with the theme of the 'foreign female' allowed the male character (and the author) to play out his fantasy and to experience a kind of sexual freedom that he associated with love. As for the Middle Eastern prostitute, needless to say, she is dehumanized in fiction and is devoid of warmth. In spite of the variations in these depiction of women, their overall portrayal as reflected by the fiction written by men is most reactionary.

Female characterizations are usually confined to secondary roles, and usually restricted to the figures of mother, mother-in-law, sister, wife, grandmother and indeed, the prostitute. She is the other pole of femininity, the negative 'Other' as it were, the classic model of the 'anti-wife' as Bouhdiba put it when he highlighted the dominance of this image on the male psyche and its importance in Arabo-Muslim culture. The figure of the prostitute, a woman who 'sells sex', in a society which denies the physical reality of women, is fascinating for the male writer as she is the castrating female par excellence: her client finds it difficult to arouse her and he then sees in her frigidity a reflection of his own impotence. It is interesting to read the critical account made by the Syrian writer, Georges

Tarabishi,[51] of El Saadawi's novel Ferdaous,[52] based on the real life story of a prostitute who kills her pimp and is sentenced to death by the court. The critic could read in the character of Ferdaous the signs of female rebellion and hatred of the exploitative male system which eventually destroys the young woman.

The representations of women conveyed by male literary texts constantly revolve around a specific image of femininity. This relies on the picture of woman as crushed victim which has been pointed out by female critics. The woman is recurrently described in passive terms, as a helpless creature, the plaything of a terrible and cruel destiny. This emphasis on aspects of female oppression, suffering and misery, in the hands of cruel husbands, brothers, and other men of the patriarchal family is articulated in a deterministic and simplistic vein. The female character is usually denied a role of resistance, and her experiences with pain and subjugation seldom lead to an awakening of her consciousness or anything that would indicate some awareness on her part and the healthy sign of a future revolt. One might argue that such representations of women are made with a progressive concern in mind: to denounce the fate of injustice that a great number of women, especially from poorer background, live daily. But its effect is more accurate to read as strategy for

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51. Georges Tarabishi, Woman against her Sex: a Critique of Nawal El Saadawi (Saqi Books, 1988).

52. Nawal El Saadawi, Woman at Point Zero.

perpetuating a certain image of women and the inertia which is believed to characterize them in a traditional culture. It is an indication of the novelists' own entrenched misogyny and an expression of their own conservative view of womanhood. First they set out to exploit within fiction the downtrodden and 'exotic' image of the Mediterranean female to provide their narrative with the ingredients of tragedy. The image of the crushed female, then, is ambiguous. Moreover, it is in a moralizing vein that some male authors exploited the theme of female prostitution, rather than as an indication of their concern with the exploitation of women.

The extent of the conservatism and chauvinism informing male fictional approaches can be ascertained by other factors peculiar to the novels written by male writers in North Africa and the rest of the Arab world. The most specific of these, one which reveals the phallocentrism of the world of these writers, inside and outside fiction as well as the ideological framework in which the meaning of gender is inscribed, is the issue of motherhood and the modalities and implications of its fictional treatment.

One notices the extreme plurality of images of woman as mother. She is the source of true tenderness and warmth in the life of the males; a refuge which bears reminiscences of a childhood from which the little boy was snatched by the father for early adulthood. Guilt and unspoken love are the feelings that the man nourishes

towards his mother, and he seeks her in the faces of women he meets later in life. Such omniscient rule over the son and such oneiric presence of the mother in the male unconscious can be interpreted, as some writers put it,[53] as the Arab woman's revenge over society. Sonia Ramzi-Abadir expresses the dilemma as follows:

> La mère règne sur l'inconscient de son fils, même devenu grand, influant ainsi sur ses rapports avec les autres femmes. C'est sa revanche inconsciente sur le monde des hommes qui l'a toujours écrasée.[54]

Yet the importance attached to the representation of women as mothers uncovers the authors' ambivalent attitude towards femaleness, love and sexuality. The mother figure brings into the narrative a register of 'good' which enters into conflict with the register of 'evil' that characterized the treatment of the prostitute or, to a lesser extent, that of any non-conventional figure of woman. The mother is reassuring and brings a sense of continuity and harmony to the life of a son where the shadow of the 'new woman' is lurking, threatening to disrupt his peace and dethrone him. This is further confirmed as noted by Ramzi-Abadir, that female characters as modern women, challenging the authority of the male, are not a predominant aspect of modern fiction and are not as widely used as the model of woman as a victim or mother.

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53. Ramzi-Abadir, Femme Arabe, p. 167.

54. Ramzi-Abadir, Femme Arabe, p. 167.

The literary treatment of the female character as mother in fiction written by men translates into a serious political dilemma facing Arab societies in the modern age. We are thinking here of the attachment to the past and what such a proposition reveals in terms of a refusal to accept and confront modernity and change. This attitude has, of course, the most direct and damaging effect on the position of women since they are seen as the agents of change. As a result, their seclusion is reinforced to avert any shift in the status-quo.

In the light of the previous argument concerning the isolation experienced by female novelists in a social milieu from which they are separated by the act of writing, a vital step in the development of the personality of the woman writer seems to be a painful separation from the mother. This precondition of her maturity and development expresses her anger at the system and is articulated in opposition to the male artist in his relationship with his mother. He still clings to her by invisible threads; the umbilical cord remains intact, unruptured. This argument is the best indication of the fact that the male artist is far from undergoing the process of awakening and consciousness raising that female textuality displays. There is a tacit agreement between the male writer and his environment, even in the case of the most self-proclaimed liberal or progressist novelists. The attachment to the character of the mother also indicates a refuge in the

past symbolized by the mother's breast and symptomatic of a refusal to deal with the present and its challenges and to look forward to an uncertain future. The modern woman, not as the maternal figure but as a woman in her own right is rejected because she is not so reassuring. This argument also explains the male author's attachment to the image of the crushed victim, a powerless feminine figure.

The present argument highlights the discrepancy between female and male fictions, and provides evidence of the subversive force of the new feminist textuality and its role in the shaping of a strong gender identity for women. In this writing, the traditional representations of women that male textuality, still deeply phallogocentric, insists on propelling in the collective psyche, are discarded at last.

Women's writing or critical work is often dismissed by male writers. For female writers who managed to develop a writing self, new pressures emerge through the assessment of their production. Readers and critics attempt to divert the message of the written composition. This attitude is part of the effective tradition of suppression of women's writing. Once a literary work is published, critical activity attempts to kill off the author and her book. There is a great deal of virulence in male critiques of female fiction, especially since the advent of feminist fiction, to an extent that one wonders about the so-called dispassionate voice which supposedly informs criticism. A good example of openly sexist

critical attack on a female novelist is Georges Tarabishi' critique of El Saadawi's novels and short stories. He tries to substantiate his claim that El Saadawi is anti-woman and provides evidence for his theory about the 'manhood ideology' informing her work, ranking it alongside the work of male novelists such as Mohammed Dib. He does not explain his use of a male paradigm in the assessment of the work of a feminist artist nor his classification of her work within male literature. However he subsequently explains the characters of El Saadawi's fiction in Freudian terms: they are all suffering from a typical female neurosis (like the author), namely the manifestation of the unconscious desire to possess the penis, and frustration culminating in abnormal behaviour. Being a feminist seems to be the natural outcome of these disturbances as the implicit message of Tarabishi's review tries to establish. To be a feminist, in the eyes of this critic, amounts to displaying unhealthy signs and attempting to recreate the 'phallus' or to emulate the' oppressor'. This identification is allegedly used by the feminist writer, here El Saadawi, who can therefore only speak like men do and reproduce their narrative techniques. Tarabishi's psycho-analytical critique shows his own anxiety in dealing with subversive forms of female expression and his latent sexism. It does not undermine the power of El Saadawi's literary voice as she can

rightly lay claim to the title of 'the exponent of the Arab feminist novel'.[55]

5. 4. Fictional Solutions to Female Oppression

Literary women from various Arab countries gathered in Fes in 1992. One critic who followed the debates, sums up their position as follows:

> Toutes ont revendiqué la spécificité de l'écriture féminine, fustigé la misogynie de la critique arabe, déploré la marginalisation de leurs oeuvres et 'corrigé' même, l'histoire de la littérature.[56]

This underlines the fact that fiction by women in Maghreb and Machrek still faces many obstacles due to the patriarchal values permeating their respective societies and the intellectual establishment, the suppression of women's writing and censorship. The unresolved issue of bilinguism was also mentioned in the case of the North African novelists. Nevertheless, their literary explorations of the world of women have shown a preoccupation with the wider problems of their societies, whether sexual or political. Assia Djebar defines El Saadawi's fiction as 'anchored in the social and sexual dramas of contemporary Arab reality'.[57] Similarly, most of the post-colonial novels display a deep consciousness

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55. Tarabishi, Against her Sex, p. 9.

56. Kacimi, 'Femme'.

57. Djebar, 'Introduction to Ferdaous', p. 388.

which is increasingly gaining in political radicalism as a response to the overall failures of Arab regimes. The solutions advocated by their fictional treatments of the 'women question' may appear sometimes escapist, fatalistic or even utopian but they all show a way forward. Regardless of variations on the theme of women's debasement and the limitations imposed on its treatment by the failure to confront its problems and contradictions, female writers have all contributed to planting seeds of freedom in their work and therefore initiating a new voice within the fiction and poetry of the Arab world as well as raising feminist consciousness and understanding of women's lives and their problems of identity to new levels of awareness.

There is a need, however, to theorise the issue of women's identity and sexuality within a critical framework. The debate opened up by fiction in its post-colonial, modern phase about the status of women tackled a dual problem, that of sexual identity on one hand and, on the other, the ideological implications and meaning of female resistance, within and beyond the domestic sphere, or the home. Both these aspects are investigated in the next two chapters.

CHAPTER SIX

GENDER AND SEXUALITY

The main concern in this chapter is to examine the role of women within the private sphere and the feminist critique of the reproduction of sexual inequalities and gender hierarchy as well as highlighting the shifting boundaries of the subversive response by women as uncovered, this time, by discourses of subjectivity.

6. 1. The Islamic Ideology of Sexuality

Since sexuality, in most Arabo-Muslim societies, is defined by an ecclesiastic order, it is important to address more fully the issue of the structuring of a specifically Muslim sexuality and the fashioning of gender representations, in the case of both male and female believers, within a determinate superstructure elaborated by early Islam and theological scholarship. According to Fatima Mernissi, this ideological superstructure remained basically rigid in its fundamental assumptions about social and sexual behaviour, in spite of a shifting infrastructure,[1]

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1. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 136.

especially during the post-colonial era. The resilience ostensibly marking the regulation of human sexuality raises an important question in relation to the ideological nature of social interaction and gender relations. Mernissi's theory can be considered as the foundation of feminist investigation into the role of ideology in the shaping of gender and the construction of sexual and cultural identities. Ultimately, the exploration of such ideology reveals the larger issue at stake, which indicates, as she herself puts it, 'power allocation in the Muslim order'.[2] Mernissi's work is essentially couched along the lines of the private/public division of Muslim social space.

Inevitably, the approach to sexuality and identity through the perspective of ideology, leads to the conception of sexuality, motherhood, masculinity and the body as homogeneous components of a unified and universal discourse. However the ambivalences inherent in the Islamic discourse on women seem to have been grasped by feminist analysis which addresses both sides of the cultural and religious discursive framework, that is its rational and conscious process, reflected in the laws, rules and various formulations, written or unwritten, legal, social or cultural, forged throughout the centuries. On the other hand, another process, juxtaposed to the former and equally timeless can be applied to the 'unconscious' delivery of discourse,

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2. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 138.

located within the realm of the imaginary. Two major feminist works illustrate this dualism of the discourse on female sexuality as conveyed by Islamic ideology: Mernissi's Beyond the Veil reflects the former approach, concerned with a 'conscious' discursive delivery whereas Woman in the Muslim Unconscious by Fatna Sabbah is mostly concerned with the latter, uncovering its hidden mythical dimension through the voice of the unconscious. As is suggested in this thesis, such a dichotomized distinction characterizes Arabo-Islamism to a large extent, stemming from the public/private division of society. It then runs through textual and social production to invest the iconography and the various modes of thought and behaviour.

6. 2. The Supremacy of Male Sexuality

It is mostly through the Mernissian theory of Islamic sexual dynamics that an exhaustive, analytical exploration of male sexuality can be drawn up. The discrepancy between the private and public spheres which favours the preeminence of masculinity and therefore classifies gender in an hierarchically moral duality which is itself, as El Saadawi argues, a reflection of the many other scissions splitting societies across the Arab world, culminating in the dualism of contemporary Arab thought. Pan-Arab feminist theory on male sexuality centres on the construction of Islamic manhood through rituals such as circumcision and various formulations

erected by religious textuality. Again this discourse on male sexuality belongs to the language of rationality and objectivity, since the theory of sexuality as conveyed by the medium of the unconscious works dialectically and subversively reverses the dualism and hierarchy operating in the world of Islam.

According to Mernissi, male sexual primacy derives from two institutions, namely polygamy and repudiation; 'the male right to a plurality of wives having the dual effect of enhancing male esteem and humiliating women'.[3] Furthermore, she argues that 'whereas polygamy deals with the intensity of the male sexual drive, repudiation deals with its instability'.[4]

That the Islamic message on the roles of the sexes bestows on masculinity special virtues and attributes is another feminist consensus as the many sexual rights and privileges granted to men alone by Arabo-Muslim civilization are recurrently highlighted in the literature on women; however there are differing opinions about the origin and formation of this male ascendancy which will be reviewed in due course in connection with the question of female sexuality.

There is probably a picturesque or metaphorical way of projecting male preeminence through the Muslim concept of paradise which epitomizes and mirrors the supremacy of maleness, which Mernissi examined at length in her more

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3. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 48.

4. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 49.

fictional study Women in Moslem Paradise.[5] This view of paradise extends male sexual pleasure, carefully cared for and drawn up by the Biblical message for earthly existence, into the after life: in other words, the orgasm men feel is only a 'foretaste of the delights secured [for them] in Paradise'.[6] Soumaya Naamane-Guessous makes a similar point: 'enfin, la satisfaction sexuelle est un avant goût des voluptés qui lui sont reservées [to the male believer] au paradis.[7] Both writers mention the *houris*, the notoriously beautiful virgin maidens, described in the Quran as having large black eyes and eternal youth. Feminists have challenged this vision of heaven and its implications for women, which male religious scholars, in the past, stretched to the limits of fantasy, investing it in the process with their own erotic yearnings and dreams;[8] addressing the issue of the gorgeous extra-terrestrial beauties awaiting

5. See Fatima Mernissi, Women in Moslem Paradise (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1988).

6. Mernissi, Moslem Paradise, p. 29

7. Soumaya Naamane-Guessous, Au-delà de toute pudeur: la sexualité féminine au Maroc (Maroc: Edif, 1979), p. 205.

8. In Sexuality in Islam, Bouhdiba presents a lyrical description of the Moslem Paradise in a chapter appropriately entitled 'The Infinite Orgasm'. He seems overwhelmed by this mythological and fabulous vision of heaven which he does not criticise for the absence of women in it. Nevertheless, he pays lip service to the cause of women in his work. Another male writer, Ascha Ghassan, from the Lebanon, allegedly progressive towards the 'woman question' and the position of women that he denounced in his book Du statut inférieur de la femme en Islam, makes an ironic comment concerning Bouhdiba's enthusiasm about men in paradise by saying: 'Bouhdiba insiste aussi, dans son analyse paradisiaque - réalisée en 1975 à Paris -, sur les jouissances sexuelles des hommes. Il ne dit rien sur le caractère positif du paradis quant à l'affirmation du "soi" féminin', p. 33.

the pious male believer in the after life laid on cushions of satin, while there are no traces in the biblical texts of the presence of a similar paradise for women, that is, there are no promises of a celestial sexual bliss reserved for the female believer whose only reward, apparently, is to be reunited with her husband alone, although she is expected to share him with a crowd of voluptuous *houris*.

From the viewpoint of discourse, the presentation of this Paradise, has a function beyond its immediate value as a superior reward from the heavens awaiting men. It is symptomatic of the overall ideology that works on upgrading manhood and bolstering virility. In contrast, the absence of an equivalent female paradise, as unreservedly eroticized as the male paradise, is indicative of the tendency followed by Muslim social, cultural and religious institutions in suppressing female eroticism and denying sexual pleasure to women. The best indication of the symbolic order in which the description of Paradise should be inserted is revealed by Mernissi's critical and somehow satirical response to it as she uncovers the absurd disputes between various scholars about the number of *houris* granted to them by the Muslim God. She starts her study however by asking the relevant question in this debate on women and paradise:

> Are we women admitted into Moslem Paradise? Yes, We are - there's no doubt about that. Moslem women are admitted into Paradise. This is explicitly said in many sacred verses. The problem is not our presence there. The problem is what we are there for: each male believer

> who wins access to Paradise will be offered a *houri*.[9]

And she later concludes, after examining the religious texts on the *houris* and paradise, that in fact 'there are two Paradises, one promised by the sacred texts and the other embroidered around these texts by skilful imams'.[10] According to her, the Quranic version allows the pious male believer in the after life only one *houri*, whereas the interpretation of these same texts by male theologians multiply the number of these extra-terrestrial lovers (because they clearly have a sexual function) to the infinite. For Mernissi, the reason for this discrepancy between the Holy Book and its interpretation by religious figures resides first in the belief that the public realm or the Islamic world is 'a male monopoly and a male privilege'.[11] Exegesis or the activity of interpretation associated with the holy scriptures, becomes a phallocratic endeavour. She then states the problem of theology as follows:

> Men should not be trusted with the interpretation of the sacred texts since they confuse objectivity with whims and fantasies. Moslem men did not content themselves with reading the beautiful Quranic verses [...], they went ahead and wrote other texts on how *they* interpret Paradise.
> Unlike women, men did not respect the sacred, they used it to suit themselves.[12]

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9. Mernissi, Moslem Paradise, p. 23.

10. Mernissi, Moslem Paradise. p. 23.

11. Mernissi, Moslem Paradise, p. 36.

12. Mernissi, Moslem Paradise, p. 36.

In spite of her reconstruction of paradise in Islam, there is a contradiction in Mernissi's position: she fails to envisage the actual presence of the *houris*, regardless of their number, as an influential sign of the supremacy granted by the concept of the Muslim paradise to men and their masculinity in the world at large. In other words, she does not address the question as to why men should enjoy extra female company in the after life, when similar treatment is not provided for the female believer? She evades this question by simply recalling the fact that, after all, 'we have institutionalized polygamy as part of the earthly Moslem family'[13] and adds apologetically that since 'a man can marry more than one woman on earth, [...] why should it be any different in Paradise ?'[14] A more radical theorising of the cosmogony of the Muslim Paradise as part of an hierarchical construction of sexualities and gender is provided by Fatna Sabbah who sees the concept of the *houri* as a reflection of an earthly order, mainly that of passivity. This passivity is assigned again exclusively to females, here the *houri*, within a domestic realm reproduced in the after-life, which recalls Mernissi's discussion of the principle of female obedience within the family as required by an authoritarian setting. Her argument runs as follows:

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13. Mernissi, Moslem Paradise, p. 31.

14. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 31.

> The *houri* is the mirror and epitome of this passivity. It is her very passivity that the believer desires. The paradisal female model, far from being of minor importance, represents the actual principle that is the foundation of the Muslim Hereafter. And the principle of passivity, which is the keystone of the paradisal system, the Muslim ideal of society, is also the keystone of the domestic field as it is designed and programmed by Muslim family laws.[15]

Nevertheless, feminist analysis highlights the ideological implications inherent in the description of paradise and other Muslim institutions such as polygamy, repudiation and an arsenal of other conjugal rights and privileges accorded exclusively to the male believer, which helps to bestow primacy on maleness and a secondary and dependent status on women.

6. 3. Framing Women's Sexuality

For Fatima Mernissi, the Muslim ideological framing was essentially centred on the curbing of pre-Islamic women's sexuality (among upper class women specifically) which was active as she argues: 'Islam banished all practices in which the sexual self-determination of women was asserted'.[16]

In the sexual sphere, the early contentious link between the religious and the feminine was resolved in the dissolution of what was, in the eyes of men, the

15. Sabbah, Muslim Unconscious, p. 95.

16. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 67.

antagonistic features of femininity. Such a process required the dismantling of the matrilineal trends of Arab societies residing in the practice of certain sexual unions that allowed women some freedom and control over their bodies and their reproduction. However, Mernissi, in a subsequent work dismisses some of these practices as being prostitution, that is part of the sexual exploitation of some females, especially slaves, an activity current during *Jahiliya* times that Islam attempted to banish or to curtail.[17] However, her theory of the existence of strong minded, independent women, who were free and active not only sexually but also politically and socially, during this era remains valid.

Also the existence of forms of divorce which allowed women to initiate separation from their male partners if they wished to, without binding rules and conditions or the exertion of coercion, seemed also to be 'remnants of women's sexual self-determination'.[18] But Mernissi focuses on the institution of sexual segregation, 'one of the main pillars of Islam's social control over sexuality'[19] which was at the origin of the rigid representations of the sexes and conceptions of gender roles.

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17. The author mentions one example of a matrilineal union, called the *sadiqa* marriage characterized by uxorilocality and the affiliation of the child to his mother and her line of descent.

18. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 60.

19. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 107.

6. 3. 1. Constructing the 'Subordinate Sex'

Feminists share a set of assumptions about the inferiority concept attached to women which converge towards a common view: that Arabo-Islamic culture is not inherently based on the inferiority of the female gender. On the contrary, women are seen as having particular strength and intelligence, not simply in absolute terms but in a more tangible and substantive manner as can be seen in Arabo-Islamic writing and the oral tradition. For instance, El Saadawi considers female inferiority a fabricated construct by societies which fear and therefore reject femininity. In her own words:

> The tyranny exerted by men over women indicates that they had taken the measure of the female's innate strength, and needed heavy fortifications to protect themselves against it.[20]

And she adds:

> To my mind, Islamic culture rests on the above premises, namely that woman is powerful and not weak, positive and not passive, capable of destroying and not easily destructible, and that if anyone needs protection, it is the man rather than the woman.[21]

But while El Saadawi sees the depiction of woman as inferior because of the fear she instigates in man as an age-old universal prejudice, 'that led him to oppress and subjugate her with all means at his disposal, be they

20. El Saadawi, Hidden Face, p. 100.

21. El Saadawi, Hidden Face, p. 100.

economic, social, legal or moral',[22] Mernissi renders it rather differently, as a corollary or a result of specific institutions. Her argument in this sense runs as follows:

> Paradoxically, and contrary to what is commonly assumed, Islam does not advance the thesis of women's inherent inferiority. Quite the contrary, it affirms the potential equality between the sexes. The existing inequality does not rest on an ideological or biological theory of women's inferiority, but is the outcome of specific social institutions designed to restrain her power: namely, segregation and legal subordination in the family structure. Nor have these institutions generated a systematic and convincing ideology of women's inferiority.[23]

The main thesis in her book on Islamic sexual mores concerns the exploding of the popular myth attached to female inferiority in the Arab areas through the exploration of some of the profound changes which mainly affected the family in its transition from a *Jahiliya* structure to its post-Islamic forms brought about by a revolutionary religion, an event understood as the advent of civilization itself, around the year 700, in contrast to the preceding period, the so-called era of 'ignorance'. So she uses this notion of ignorance and civilization, that is, the dividing line between ignorance, disorder, injustice and sexual laxity, as historians generally describe it, and the new era characterized by order, enlightenment, social justice,

22. El Saadawi, Hidden Face, p. 100.

23. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 19.

political coherence and of a 'civilized sexuality' that opened up with the rise of the new religion.[24]

But as she notes, civilized Muslim sexuality largely transformed the lives of women, the norms of sexual unions and altered kinship patterns. Male sexuality was not the object of similar attempts at structuring, in at least two respects: sexual rights which remained largely untouched, and another practice of *Jahiliya* life, slavery, which, although reformed by the prophet who restricted it in his days and sought to abolish it, persisted, constituting for centuries a source of sexual gratification and cheap labour for men from the merchant and wealthy classes. Apparently, the sexual exploitation of female slaves was endorsed by the new system in spite of the reforms that it underwent. So the slaves and women deprived of male protection or who fell into slavery after the defeat of their tribes in wars, certainly saw the advent of the Islamic regulation on women's status as a positive step, especially as it provided them with a way out of slavery and some security. On the contrary, one understands, reading Mernissi's historical research on the rise of the Muslim family that females from the aristocracy and middle classes of Arabia, accustomed to more freedom and authority, were to discover that the social structures introduced by the new religion increasingly confined

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24. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 46.

within to the walls of harems and deprived them of exercising power in the outside world.

As indicated earlier, under Islam, male sexuality was not circumscribed by binding notions of commitment to honour and ethics, at least not to the extent these were imposed on women. On the contrary, men's entitlement to full sexual enjoyment with as many partners as they wished was endorsed by Kuranic rule and codified accordingly (the rotation of female sexual partners was possible through polygamy, repudiation and the access to slaves and concubines). As Mernissi argues, Islam's position on sexuality thus contradicted its initial claim to bring about a global civilization for all:

> If promiscuity and laxity are signs of barbarism, then only women's sexuality was civilized by Islam; male sexuality is promiscuous (by virtue of polygamy) and lax (by virtue of repudiation).[25]

It is also on the basis of this fundamental discrepancy in the Islamic conception of male and female sexuality embodied and reflected by the public/private divide which was grasped by feminist work in its analysis of the uses made of human sexual behaviour, largely at the expense of female identity, in order to uphold order, harmony and self consciousness; 'the central principle of the Muslim family' appeared to be 'male supremacy and the systematic

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25. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 46.

inhibition of feminine initiative, of female self determination'.[26]

Naamane-Guessous, in her analysis of the sexual behaviour of Moroccan women, uses a key-concept, that of '*hchouma*', an Arabic term referring to a certain code of morality centred on the notion of shame which makes both males and females passive beings who have to abide by strict sexual norms to avoid falling into disrepute and into committing '*zina*', although these conditions of behaviour differ in intensity according to gender, class and geographic location, rural or urban. Women are indeed more heavily constrained by the code of conduct dictated by '*hchouma*'. It is the structure of shame which is instilled forcefully into the young girl's personality as a safeguard of her morality, which consists in inhibiting self-expression and initiative. In that sense, it also functions as a device in sustaining passivity, which is equated with acceptable behaviour. So, in the case of women 'évoquer la sexualité: c'est *hchouma*'.[27] A less direct but no less efficacious way of discouraging or neutralizing rebellion and what it requires in terms of female cooperation in the preservation of the status-quo is the belief that female protest is anti-Islamic behaviour. Female revolt is essentially rendered by the term *nouchouz* meaning at the same time rebellion and subversion as well as

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26. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 84.

27. Naamane-Guessous, Au-delà de toute pudeur, p. 15.

disobedience, crystallizing the idea of female antagonism against her husband and the establishment.[28] This is part of the institutionalizing of female passivity which makes criticism of male privileges, especially in the frame of wedlock, a daring act against society and God.

The persistent concern with female sexuality in Islam entailed first the elaboration of a typically feminine space: the domestic world where women were secluded. The veil provides an extension of that system of seclusion as it makes women invisible when they cross the boundaries of the *umma* or the public sphere, outside the confines of the home. Also, the female 'whose sexual frustration is organized institutionally'[29] eventually becomes a-sexual as the sexual instinct, in her case, is so effectively repressed. She can also develop an ambiguous attitude to sex and men as the problem of virginity will reveal.

Fatna Sabbah has investigated the construction of women's inferiority within classical Arabo-Islamic textuality and erotic literature by men, enhancing the view that the contemporary position of women derives from male thinkers and theologians. She has considered classical representations of women embedded in orthodox and 'unorthodox' writing, which have influenced and shaped present-day femininity. She quotes from the work

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28. Mernissi, Women and Islam: an Historical and Theological Enquiry (London: Basil Blackwell, 1991), p. 28; first published in French as Le Harem politique, le prophète et les femmes (Paris: Albin Michel, 1987).

29. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 48.

of the medieval Muslim thinker, El-Ghazali, specifically from a chapter entitled 'Describing Women and their Good and Bad Points':

> A wife will become dear to her husband and gain his affection, firstly by honouring him; secondly by obeying him when they are alone together, and (further) by bearing in mind his advantages and disadvantages, adorning herself (for him only), keeping herself concealed (from other men) and secluding herself in the house, by coming to him tidy and pleasantly perfumed, having meals ready (for him) at the (proper) times and cheerfully preparing whatever he desires, by not making impossible demands, not nagging, keeping her nakedness covered at bedtime, and keeping her husband's secrets during his absence and in his presence.[30]

This kind of narrative which had a determining impact on social expectations of women's roles is criticized by Sabbah in her feminist writing, as she challenges the message of his orthodox writing on women. In addition to the legacy of the theological textuality on womanhood, female inferiority and passivity were ultimately fashioned by specific institutions, such as motherhood and virginity.

6. 3. 2. Institutionalizing Motherhood

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30. Although Fatna Sabbah herself quotes this particular passage from El-Ghazali's book on theology, I have resorted to the use of a longer version of the extract from another source, the translation made by Madelain Farah of the medieval work of the scholar (born in Tùs in 450/1050 and died in 505/1111) that he provides with an Introduction which offers a conservative explanation of the master's ideas: Marriage and Sexuality in Islam: a Translation of El-Ghazali's Book on the Etiquette of Marriage from the "Ihyà" (Salt Lake city: University of Utah Press, 1984), p. 41.

In fundamentalist literature, it is mainly in performing her role as a 'perfect' mother that woman as *Muslimah* (believer) is expected to be most 'useful' to her society and to fulfil her religious duty. There is emphasis on the need for women to offer the greatest sacrifices through the motherly function. So the tendency within such representations of women is to focus on the idea of motherhood through the analogy with martyrdom, 'good' mothers becoming martyrs whose just reward is awaiting them in heaven.[31] There are also repeated references, to the present day, of the famous saying uttered by the prophet on the subject, that 'Paradise is under the mother's feet'. A female exponent of the fundamentalist position on motherhood is Aliah Shleifer who recently expounded a traditional theory of motherhood that defines woman as 'believer, wife and mother', exclusively in terms of her roles within the private realm. In other words, her position is concordant to a more ancient tradition as articulated hitherto by El-Ghazali. Such analyses, made widespread today through the voice of Imams in mosques during Friday sermons are of growing concern for feminists and women generally, especially considering the revival of religious fanaticism. Fundamentalists succeed in spreading such phallocratic ideology in an authoritarian manner through initiatives similar to Shleifer's work,

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31. See Aliah Schleifer, Motherhood in Islam (Cambridge: the Islamic Academy, 1988).

which support their arguments with assessments from contemporary leading scholars:

> The Muslim woman has traditionally been known to be scholar, merchant, crafstwoman and, even in emergency situations, soldier. From the perspective of *shari'ah*, however, these activities are secondary considerations, not incumbent upon all women, for a woman's basic role is that of wife and mother. Motherhood, in fact, is the special vehicle by which she attains respect in this life, and ultimately leads to her just reward.[32]

In the light of the development of Islamic discourse on motherhood through the rise of fundamentalism, female reproduction has become, more than ever, one of the most significant battlegrounds for feminist theorists, often joined by female doctors, gynaecologists, and lawyers, who increasingly criticize the institutionalizing of this role and its glorification through conservative and reactionary rhetoric. They address crucial issues, calling for birth control, the availability of contraceptive methods (still frowned upon by some groups of women, especially in rural society), the development of policies for the medical and social protection of mother and child, housing and child care facilities and, broadly speaking, the organization of campaigns of consciousness-raising, targeted especially at housewives and women living in the countryside.

Soumaya Naamane-Guessous, for instance, describes the situation of motherhood in Morocco and her arguments

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32. Schleifer, Motherhood, p. 89.

are applicable to the rest of the area. She opens her study on motherhood with a chapter on the Arabo-Muslim concept of 'l'épouse-mère' with the following words:

> La femme n'a souvent que la maternité pour combler le vide de sa vie conjugale; avoir un enfant est d'ailleurs partie intégrante de son devoir d'épouse, et l'on sait que ce devoir est, dans notre société fondateur du lien marital. La position d'épouse se renforce lors de la grossesse, de l'accouchement, et surtout lorsque l'enfant né est de sexe mâle.[33]

Feminists have criticized the oppressive use of womanhood through the maternity function although their discourse on motherhood sometimes uses the issue of maternity, that of the life-giving force conferred on women by reproduction. Nevertheless, this perspective is not, by all means, a fundamental structure in their thinking about the family, at least not in the same enduring positive manner through which it was perceived by some feminists from the Occident, especially radical feminists, who believe in the power inherent in female reproduction and in the 'nurturing' values of womanhood. Moreover, they do not seem to share the other extreme position of First World feminists on the role of women as mothers and housewives, roles which they see as inhibiting and alienating.[34] Arab feminists have explored the theme of motherhood within the overall

33. Naamane-Guessous, Au-delà de toute pudeur, p. 105.

34. See Women, Development and Survival in the Third World (London: Longman, 1991), ed. by Haleh Afshar, p. 3. Afshar speaks about the rejection of motherhood and domesticity by some feminists who tend to reproduce unquestioningly Western criticism.

debate on the family and the subordinate status of women within the household unit, linking it to the economically depressed societies in which the largest of women live. They distinguish two main functions motherhood seems to hold: it reproduces patriarchy and in exchange, offers women the possibility to repay society for the emotional and intellectual growth they are denied, by forging a special bonding with their male children. The mother/son relationship, so overriding in the Arab East, becomes a refuge and the means through which women retaliate against the world as the adult son remains dependent on the mother figure for life. Deprived of authority, women stress their role as mothers through repeated pregnancies and a life devoted to child bearing and rearing, from which they ultimately derive respect and consideration in society at large. Motherhood and domesticity should not, in that respect, offer the only route of escape out of social oppression and the way to gain recognition in societies which largely exclude females from the world at large nor become the single alternative in women's lives. Broadly speaking, from a feminist perspective, motherhood is linked in many instances to the subordination of women through the importance granted by society to the motherly function and its appropriation of the female body. The focus in feminist discourse is on the authoritarian and hierarchical family set-up and the restrictions this entails for females in the household, burdened by a number of responsibilities and duties which increase considerably in poorer households. The criticism of

women in the role of mothers does not extend to the rejection of the family itself, commonly seen in Western feminist literature as the seat of the oppression of women.[35] This also suggests however that patriarchy is about the oppression of younger men by the elders.

The promulgation of various institutions by Islamic cultural discourse contributes to upholding patriarchy. Marriage does not provide the wife with more freedom and authority as, in the eyes of the law, she only passes from the guardianship of the father to that of the husband. The husband's right to a plurality of wives and his relatively easy access to repudiation and divorce are further devices by which the female is legally maintained in a secondary position or a minor status and her sexuality subject to her husband's control and, inevitably, to his sexual whims. The maternal role becomes a means of reproducing the family and such a reproductive role can become binding and alienating.

6. 3. 3. Institutionalizing Virginity

In Arab society, virginity is a condition imposed by men on women following the Eastern man's perennial wish to wed only virgins. This male requirement led to the centring of female sexuality and personality on the idea

35. See Michèle Barrett, Women's Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis (London: Verso Publishers, 1986). The topic of the official treatment of the family is discussed in the next chapter. It is also argued that the disintegration of the family in the Third World is one of the motives of the debasement of female status rather than empowering.

of virginity and the image of women as eternal virginal maidens; as Sabbah argues:

> This concept of the virgin is the pole around which sexuality is organized in the Muslim psyche. Neither the trauma of colonization, nor that of neocolonization, seem to have shaken it.[36]

The study of virginity as a manifestation of the persistence of rigid sex roles is gaining considerable ground with feminists who criticize this conception of femininity that defines the ideal woman by the state of her vagina on her wedding night.

In The Hidden Face of Eve, El Saadawi recounts her experiences as a doctor who had first hand experience of the obsession with female virginity as a countless number of parents, especially from rural Egypt, visited her clinic, dragging behind them a weeping daughter or a traumatized bride, demanding a medical check on her chastity. She points out the general ignorance, on the part of some husbands, fathers and even mothers, regarding the biology of the female body; for instance, the fact that few people acknowledge the existence of several kinds of hymens which do not necessarily bleed when pierced by a penis or a male finger because of their elasticity or other physical characteristics. Her work

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36. Sabbah, Muslim Unconscious, p. 32. This statement is paradoxical: colonization helped reinforce these male complexes and fears. More than ever, as argued in this thesis, women became, because of colonial (and neo-colonial) imposition, custodians of morality through restricting their behaviour. The social focus on virginity works as a device of the control of women.

as a surgeon and psychiatrist helped her to denounce the cruel reality she uncovered in her office, that of many unfortunate young brides or even single girls, particularly in the countryside, for whom the breaking of the hymen on their wedding night failed to produce the precious drops of blood which save the 'family's honour' or who are suspected by a male relative of having had intercourse or of being pregnant and, as a consequence, are made to pay, often with their lives, for such 'errors'. There is no stigma attached to the practice of 'free' sexuality on the part of single men whose virility is, on the contrary, as El Saadawi puts it, measured by their sexual prowess and the number of their female 'conquests'. Another disturbing aspect of the reality of 'deflowering' on the wedding night, often celebrated as an important ritual, considering the significance attached to pre-marital female chastity, is similarly denounced by Naamane-Guessous who provides several testimonies on the brutality that accompanies these first sexual experiences lived, in some cases, as quasi-rape:

> Nous ne pouvons parler ici d'acte sexuel lors de la nuit des noces. Il s'agit en fait de viols scandaleux, encouragés par l'ordre social qui ne vise qu'un seul but: faire saigner la victime pour sauver les apparences.[37]

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37. Naamane-Guessous, Au-delà de toute pudeur, p. 180.

Mernissi explores the problem of virginity from the angle of what is known as 'fabricated' virginity[38] which is the medical restoration of broken hymens by the means of surgical operations performed by gynaecologists on young women (especially urban women) who had dared to venture into the forbidden territory of pre-marital sex. As a consequence, these women face a dilemma on the eve of their wedding ceremony, which is the risk of destitution and shame (along with their parents who are the first ones to lose face and suffer social stigma if their daughter is found to be non-virgin, virginity being thus a 'family matter'). The dilemma however can be resolved and the threat of family dishonour averted if the woman resorts to the use of surgical help, which will engage her in further lies and hypocrisy by pretending to be chaste and sexually ignorant.

Through the feminist critical presentation of the virgin, 'one of Mediterranean man's most treasured commodities with hymen intact sealing a vagina which no man has touched',[39] that society's concern over female sexuality unfolds in the most telling manner. Virginity constitutes the most compelling device by which the framing of Arabo-Muslim femaleness within the religious and social discourse is thus shaped and codified. A feminist examination can reveal the links existing

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38. Fatima Mernissi, 'Virginity and Patriarchy' in Women and Islam (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1982), ed. by Azizah Al-Hibri, pp. 183-191.

39. Mernissi, 'Virginity', p. 183.

between virginity and patriarchy, the desexualization of women and the appropriation of the female body as a commodity. There is emphasis on the forcible aspect of virginity in relation to issues of paternity, that is, establishing the legitimacy of the child and protecting the name of the Father. However, beyond the question of paternity, virginity is criticized by feminists as being an institution for the social control that Arab societies exert so forcibly over female sexuality and the woman's body, a warrant for the safeguard of a compelling and vital concept of social prestige, namely honour. Honour becomes, in the light of this argument 'determined by women's sexual behaviour [and] concentrated in the woman's body, in a spot situated in the lower part of her abdomen'[40] as El Saadawi puts it or as Mernissi wittingly remarks: 'the concept of honour and virginity locate the prestige of a man between the legs of a woman'.[41]

As for the factors that explain the persistence of virginity and the sexual oppression of women as a whole, they are to be found in the material, historical and political conditions of the Arab world and the fact that, as El Saadawi argues, 'mental and physical constraints are imposed on girls'.[42] In addition, 'the concept of honour in contemporary Arab thought remains trapped inside the heritage of ancient slavery'.[43]

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40. El Saadawi, Hidden Face, p. 7.

41. Mernissi, 'Virginity', p. 183.

42. El Saadawi, Hidden Face, p. 7.

43. El Saadawi, Hidden Face, p. 7.

However, the resilience of the myth of the virgin in a modern world, translated into the male desire for virgins - a desire which is nourished and endorsed by sacred texts -[44] is seen by feminists as an indication of a more fundamental need: Fatna Sabbah sees it as 'legitimated and sacred wish, soothing to the believer in a patriarchal Islam, organized as it is in minute detail to mitigate his feelings of insecurity'.[45] But Fatima Mernissi grasped more fully the dramatic significance of virginity in relation to what she terms 'the great tragedy of the patriarchal male',[46] in other words 'as a symptom of deeply and painfully buried conflicts, as a bearer of messages of which the importance has nothing to do with the insignificant bit of hymen which represents them'.[47] She considers these conflicts as eruptions of the contradictions tearing apart Arab society as a whole. She approaches the problem of false virginity within the broader issue of inequality, social, sexual, political and material:

> Like honour, virginity is the manifestation of a purely male preoccupation in societies where inequality, scarcity and the degrading subjection of some people to others deprive the community as a whole of the only true human strength: self confidence.[48]

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44. For instance, the *houris* are described as eternal virgins.

45. Sabbah, Muslim Unconscious, p. 32.

46. Mernissi, 'Virginity', p. 185.

47. mernissi, 'Virginity', p. 184.

48. Mernissi, 'Virginity', p. 183.

Broadly speaking, she articulates the problem of virginity or the forcing of a general sexual abstinence on women, from a two-fold viewpoint: firstly as a manifestation of the overall sexual and political status-quo and economic deprivation, and secondly as an expression of the alienation of women who, while aspiring to be free and in control of their bodies, try to counteract social hypocrisy and cruelty by resorting to deceit themselves.

Although the female response is seen as dubious and deceptive, having a potent negative and harmful effect on both partners or spouses, it is not completely unsubversive, which is also interpreted by the author as probably one of the signs of female vindication and rebellion, what she has called elsewhere *nouchouz*, against a macho culture in its attempts to impose specific identities on women. This argument signals a further problem: the existence of a bitter war between the sexes in which a domineering patriarchy encounters a demise on the part of women who undermine some of its sacrosanct traditions among which virginity is the dominant perquisite. This confrontation is also revealed, according to feminists, by what virginity entails for men regarding their deepest perception of woman seen antagonistically as the ultimate 'Other' or the enemy. And like rape, virginity becomes, not a matter of sex, but rather of power and domination, as Mernissi herself says:

> For the patriarchal sexual act is childish, it is the act of a man who has never outgrown the terrible fear of his insignificance in relation to the life-giving mother, and who has never become adult enough to see sexual pleasure as a relation between equals rather than as a a mechanism for establishing a hierarchy and enforcing power, domination and therefore dehumanizing.[49]

Feminists outline the most obvious implication of virginity which lies in the sexual and moral double standard applied to the sexuality of both men and women whereby it is a matter of who should be chaste and repressed and who should be licentious and free. It also works also as an indication of the value put on women by a given society.

For Mernissi, the problem of virginity, whether 'natural' or 'artificial', and its underlying deceit and hypocrisy can only be resolved by an acceptance of social, political and economic transformations and the concomitant revolution in relationships between men and women and the overall superstructure, so far a threatening perspective that the author examines at length in a separate study. But she also reviews the implications of the sexual attitude of 'Mediterranean men, trained to seduce, pursue and dominate women, and incapable of conceiving love as an exchange between two equals',[50] because:

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49. Mernissi, 'Virginity', p. 186.

50. Mernissi, 'Virginity', p. 190.

> They will continue to penetrate stitched hymens, as artificial as their relationships with women. Similarly, they will continue in their traumatized attitude towards change, and will remain attached to trivial social rules instead of controlling the environment, their space, the international market and its mechanisms, technology, energy, everything which ultimately shapes their lives.[51]

For the women interviewed by Soumaya Naamane-Guessous, pre-marital sex is a highly problematic and perilous enterprise, and one which is riddled with deep anxieties about the outcome of the acclaimed wedding night. Another source of apprehension is the fear of pregnancy for abortion is prohibited by Islamic jurisdiction unless there are exceptional circumstances threatening the life of the mother who must be a lawfully wedded wife. A significant question arises about the contradiction entailed by the enforcing of an arsenal of sexual prohibitions on females and the sudden incursion of sexuality in their lives on their wedding night: 'suffit-il du défoulement d'une nuit et de la suppression de l'hymen pour libérer la femme des interdits, patiemment érigés depuis des générations et qu'on lui a si bien inculqués?'.[52] Her question is valid even in the case of more adventurous females who break the taboo of virginity by having sexual intercourse with a boyfriend or complete strangers, for most of these females would have already suffered some psychological mutilation due to the many repressions imposed on them by morality and religion

51. Mernissi, 'Virginity', p. 190.

52. Naamane-Guessous, Au-delà de toute pudeur, p. 188.

throughout their upbringing, which makes the initiation into love and sexual pleasure sometimes a painful process, often a conflictual one, leading at times to frigidity, a widespread problem among women, as it is being increasingly apparent from the many clinical and psycho-analytical surveys.[53] This is further reinforced by the adverse and malevolent attitude of society towards love between a man and a woman.

6. 3. 4. Disparaging Heterosexual Love

The conjugal couple is a recent construct,[54] mainly because, as feminists have explained, Muslim marriage is not built on equality between spouses but on a partnership between two families and the cohabitation, in the traditional social structure, of the wife with her in-laws, to provide the man who is the head of the household with sexual and domestic services. In this wider family setting, still predominant in rural society, emotional closeness is usually rare in the lives of the spouses as there are no conditions encouraging the growth of intimacy between them. For instance, Naamane-Guessous

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53. Some articles on women's health appeared in Women of the Arab World: the Coming Challenge, ed. by Nahid Toubia (London: Zed Books LTD, 1988): 'Women and Health in the Arab World' by May Haddad, pp. 93-97; 'Women and Health in Sudan', by Nahid Toubia, pp. 98-109; 'The Modern Tunisian Woman Between Hysteria and Depression', by Mouine Chelhi, pp. 110-116.

54. For instance, as argued in chapter five, the idea of man and woman as a couple, in fictional terms, first appeared in North Africa in the literature of Assia Djebar and in the Middle East in Layla Ba'labaki's work. In sociological terms, the 'couple' has emerged with the 'nuclear' family as a result of post-independence urbanization, the rural exodus to towns and other considerations.

has demonstrated the effects of economic hardship and lack of space on the relationship between husband and wife which can become strained and tense, due to these difficult conditions of living, often killing sexual desire and allowing women no room for relaxation.

It appears therefore that the most effective device by which the Muslim order attained a polarization of the sexes within the sexual and public spheres which, needless to recall, reflect a deeper level of segregation that feminists expressed in various ways, in an essential scission between the Muslim God and His female creatures, lies not so much in the drawing of geographical, sexual, psychological and social frontiers between men and women but in discouraging a more significant relationship between them, the emotional bond, namely love. Feminist criticism uncovers the misogyny latent in Muslim representations of the feminine by stressing the hostile social position to love and intimacy between men and women. While Naamane-Guessous highlights the effects and manifestations of such cultural ideology in modern Morocco, Mernissi analyzes its early formation. She provides an interesting account of Islam's antagonistic attitude towards heterosexual love which it undermined and disparaged through the implementation of a segregation that divides the social world into male and female spheres and imposes on women, as explained hitherto, seclusion, veiling and a strict code of conduct. Sexual segregation thus fulfils a specifically meaningful function because, once drawn up, it will be an

attempt 'to prevent sexual interaction between members of the '*umma*' and 'members of the domestic universe'.[55]

Womanliness, the centre of sexual dynamics in the male oriented Islamic ideology, conveys then the figure of social and sexual anomie. Sabbah shows the institutionalizing of female Otherness in the passage from El-Ghazali on his portrayal of the ideal woman through unreserved obedience (stated by the Quran and other texts of orthodoxy),[56] passivity and invisibility. As for men, they are socialized differently and are, from an early age, advised to adopt a distrustful attitude towards members of the female sex.

At the heart of the Muslim ideological marginalization of femininity, there is thus the notion of religion's negative, even hostile, attitude towards love between man and woman, and their emotional closeness which seem to represent a threat to Muslim civilization (woman alone is already a menace) and to represent a menace to 'God's monopoly' over his creatures. As Mernissi points out:

> The role played by sexual segregation, arranged marriage, the mother's importance in the son's life, all seem to be part of a system that discourages heterosexual couple relations.[57]

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55. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 140.

56. The most recent is a legal document, the Family Code (see chapter seven for a discussion of Family law).

57. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 94.

Naamane-Guessous reaches a similar conclusion, reinforced with further evidence, drawn from her own sociological research, when she says: 'la place du sentiment amoureux n'est donc pas très importante dans la représentation du mariage; l'homme rêvé n'est pas tant un amant qu'un mari'.[58]

Mernissi expresses this wariness of women as caused by the inherent view of women as dangerous:

> Women are a dangerous distraction that must be used for the specific purpose of providing the Muslim nation with offspring and quenching the tensions of the sexual instinct. But in no way should women be an object of emotional investment or the focus of attention, which should be devoted to Allah alone in he form of knowledge-seeking, meditation, and prayer.[59]

This wariness of women and heterosexual involvement is expressed, according to her, within the social/sexual devices for the control of females: 'arranged marriage, the important role of the mother in the son's life, and the fragility of the marital bond (as revealed by the institutions of repudiation and polygamy)'.[60] She grounds this ideology of the family within the wider philosophical configuration of the sexes as opposite entities. She also claims that:

> Muslim marriage is based on the premisses that social order can be maintained only if women's dangerous potential for chaos restrained by a

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58. Naamane-Guessous, Au-delà de toute pudeur, p. 67.

59. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 45.

60. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 45.

> dominating non-loving husband who has, beside his wife, other females (concubines, co-wives and prostitutes) available for his sexual pleasure under equally degrading conditions.[61]

It therefore appears that 'the entire Muslim social structure can be seen as an attack on, and a defence against, the disruptive power of female sexuality'.[62]

Now, let us examine the two paradigms attached to Arabo-Muslim femininity as they emerge from the passage above, in other words, the power inherent in this picturing of femininity and the serious challenge it seems to pose for the Muslim order. The implications of these structures for present day feminist politics will be discussed in the conclusive statement to this chapter, as it will be the underlying theme of the forthcoming chapters.

6. 4. Transposing Male Discourse: Into the Unconscious

6. 4. 1. The Duality of Womanhood: Feminist Readings

It is important to outline Mernissi's thesis as it highlights the Islamic configuration of the feminine, the trends of which follow a dual perspective, in short, what she labels the 'implicit' and 'explicit' theory of female sexuality.[63] She focuses on the idea that the seclusion of women who are also sequestered in Arabo-Muslim

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61. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 167.

62. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 45.

63. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 32.

societies is based on an implicit belief in their power and the active nature of their sexuality even if apparently, that is, in the explicit discursive formulations on women, they are seen as subservient and futile and treated accordingly. But in societies where there are 'no such methods of surveillance and coercion of women's behaviour, the concept of female sexuality is passive'.[64] Fear of women resides in the hidden and inherent belief in the potent danger they represent and the ascendency they hold over men. She suggests that:

> The explicit theory is the prevailing contemporary belief that men are aggressive in their interaction with women, and women are passive. The implicit theory, driven far further into the Muslim unconscious, is epitomized in Imam Ghazali's classical work. He sees civilization as struggling to contain women's destructive, all absorbing power. Women must be controlled to prevent men from being distracted from their social and religious duties. Society can survive only by creating institutions that foster male dominance through sexual segregation and polygamy for believers.[65]

It is the 'explicit' part of such discourse on femininity, well debated by feminist theory so far in its analysis of female sexuality as drawn up by a combination of male discourses which is, at this particular juncture, equated with a process of perception I identified earlier as a 'conscious' code. This method is deemed confidently 'rational' and objective as well by virtue of the nature

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64. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 31.

65. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 32.

of its attempts at framing an important part of women's lives, their social and sexual behaviour and their interrelationships with men, which are so thorough and meticulous. It is thus concerned with figuring an ordered view of reality and culture and is therefore grounded in an ideological process. The relevance of this ideological investigation applies to a synthesis of the laws, human and divine, by which femininity is defined, female sexuality regulated and women assigned a specific status and role in the world at large.

So, according to Mernissi, the answer to the question addressed by many feminists about the construction of female 'inferiority' lies within a conception of sexuality revolving around these 'explicit' and 'implicit' theories, which two principles could be parallelled or implemented to the earlier part of this thesis, whereby the shaping of gender was depicted through a review of cultural images delivered by a process resulting from both 'conscious' and 'unconscious' treatment of womanhood; they tended to work simultaneously towards the same effect: that is the perception of women as 'naturally' weaker in the outside world was being juxtaposed with an 'implicit' or 'unconscious' view that women are powerful and strong-minded with the possibility that they are dangerous as well if let to their own devices. The latter view was illustrated through the use of the folkloric figure of the ogress.

She supplements her views with evidence taken from statements by key Muslim scholars who have studied the Quranic message on human behaviour. She, however, examines this religious textuality to expose the roots of the fundamental discursive paradox regarding women by using not only a specific classic male scholarly work of Islamic jurisprudence, that of the medieval Muslim figure El-Ghazali but by using another authoritative male account of female sexuality, Sigmeud Freud, whose work provides an interesting contrast to Islamic methodology.

She stresses the difference between Freud's European model, where femaleness is equated with passivity and the model constructed by El-Ghazali, centuries earlier, for a Muslim society whereby the concept of female sexuality was fully active. Freud's psycho-analytical theory, as Mernissi reminds us, focuses on the physical lack, or atrophy, the female suffers from and which is the penis or 'phallic appendage'. Women are presented accordingly as 'failed' or incomplete men, whereas the Arab scholar put forward the thesis of a more aggressive form of the feminine but 'turned inward'.[66] This is further sustained by the fact that El-Ghazali, as Mernissi argues, acknowledges the existence of 'phallic activity' in the female. It ensues from such argument that the Arabo-Muslim view of femaleness is already a dual one: it is apparently smooth, passive, transparent and

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66. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 41.

subservient and inwardly but under this surface, it is dark and subversively active and corrosive.

She explains that within both conceptions, whether Muslim or Christian, this differentiation is first expressed at the level of the biological. 'For Freud, 'the sex cells' functioning is symbolic of the male-female relation during intercourse. He views it as an 'antagonistic encounter between aggression and submission'.[67] And, accordingly, the sperm was then considered the only sex cell to be active in the procreation process. While Mernissi uncovers the Ghazalian conception which subscribed to a drastically different view: that of an active female sexual cell or ovum with a determining role in procreation. This view, Mernissi argues, is based on an identity established by the Arab scholar between male and female sexuality and 'which appears clearly in his granting the female the most uncontested expression of phallic sexuality, ejaculation'.[68] Mernissi does not miss the point about the scientific progress recorded by biology in the time of Freud which - one would expect - should have normally made him well aware of the fallacy of his theory on the biologically bound female passivity. But this flaw in his work only helps to highlight the tenacious impact gender stereotypes have on even so-called scientific or objective research and the force of ideology; in the

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67. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 36.

68. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 37.

Freudian instance, it is an ideology ingrained in a firm belief in female inferiority.[69] The rigidity comes from the sedimentation or embeddedness of these categories of thought within the collective unconscious. But equally significant is the misconception at the basis of the Ghazalian endeavour as it confers a certain identity on sexual cells between males and females. This impairment represents an analogous misapprehension and should, similarly, outline the rigidity of beliefs about the nature of maleness and femaleness in one particular time and place; in the case of El-Ghazali, there is, behind his idea of the identity of sexual cells in both sexes, an assumption that the feminine, equated somehow with maleness, is powerful, militant and even offensive. From this, Mernissi then articulates not only her theory of the 'implicit' aspect of femininity but also from which she derives her own assumptions about the male fear of womanhood.

There is therefore a special interest attached to her presentation of the current fear of femaleness. Her use of Eastern thought has proved extremely useful, firstly at throwing light on the Muslim concept of female sexuality and secondly at uncovering other aspects dealing with the mutual gender perceptions in view of the fear described above. There are implications for present

69. Freud seems to have been influenced by medieval Christian scientists who derived their own knowledge from early Arabic texts on embryology and anatomy. Freud's ideas are, more specifically, related to the work of the medieval Christian thinker Tertullian, who put forward the thesis about the man's determining role in procreation.

day society which is increasingly, caught up among other things, in a battle of the sexes. In this sense, her work offers a valuable theoretical basis for discussing modern pan-Arab feminist aesthetics and politics.

So the dualistic view of femininity which marked medieval Arab work on sexuality and embryology, supplemented with a comparative study of Freudian and post-Freudian theories in the Christian West, reflects eloquently, yet again, the explicit and the implicit perspectives of the Arabo-Muslim discursive tradition on women.

This theory of the implicit which necessarily entails an oneiric journey into the unconscious has perhaps no innovative qualities in terms of methodology but it has certainly a valuable impact on feminist criticism: it has introduced a new debate, that is the use of semiotics and psycho-analysis in the mainstream of Women's studies.

And it is the tension within the dichotomous presentation of womanhood which is self-generating of powerful images of women, sub-jacent to the dominant viewing of women in the 'real' social world as dependent beings. So there is a kind of constant dialectic operating between the two visions of womanhood.

Arabo-Muslim representations of women are dual: there is the image of women as 'inferior', weak, a-sexual, brainless and consequently harmless, in opposition to a more hidden - even sub-conscious - view of women as strong, sexually active, highly intelligent

and therefore dangerous. Feminist work highlights this binary conception of womanhood, although analytical emphasis was laid in previous sections largely on the former conception of womanhood constructed by an explicit textual and popular tradition which, starting with the Old and New Testament, later invested the Quran, the *Sunna* and the subsequent textual activity, oral and written, fictional or scholarly and official, which flourished in the Arab world till the collapse of the Muslim civilization. But, the two conceptions of femininity were never completely split and disembodied, as they often overlapped, whereas similar traditional images of women elsewhere could be seen as being more clear-cut and somehow disconnected.

The feminist review of these images of femininity is part of a process investigating the sub-text of pan-Arab cultural discourse on women, what Mernissi calls the implicit theory of this discursivity, whereas previously, the debate focused what she terms the 'explicit' theory. For El Saadawi, the binary social perception of womanhood, like many other dualities, derives basically from the contradictions splitting modern societies along antithetical lines.[70] But in what follows, emphasis will be laid largely on a more fundamental explanation and expression of such duality as expounded by Fatima Mernissi and illustrated by Fatna Sabbah's vivid

70. El Saadawi's theory on the binary structure of Arab society and thought is expounded in her 'Introduction' to the papers of The Second International Conference of the Arab Women Solidarity Association (Cairo: Dar El Kitab, 1990).

presentation of the sexually voracious female as she emerges from the Arabo-Muslim unconscious.

The importance of Mernissi's work lies mostly in the fact that it has bequeathed to the present debate on sexuality a useful analytical basis for approaching a related issue, associated with what was identified so far as the 'implicit' meaning of womanhood; namely the male dread and distrust of women. This concealed fear of women is consequently intimately linked to the hidden belief in the aggressive and active nature of female sexuality and as an endorsement of its potent negative power. This raises another 'implicit' fear, the menace of disorder read in this potentially destructive female libido. This argument leads directly into what appears as the crux of the matter within feminist literature generally and Mernissi's theory in particular: the notion of '*fitna*'. As already pointed out by various authors, it principally refers to the idea of chaos but it is also a term holding another meaning, that of female beauty; hence the relevant association drawn between women's seductive power and the concept of social disarray.

Concomitant to this notion, there is consequently the deep-seated belief that anarchy and disruption can be brought about by moral disintegration and female sexual laxity and freedom. Mernissi thus raises questions regarding the threat of disorder - social, sexual and ultimately political - embodied by the term of '*fitna*':

> Why does Islam fear *fitna*? Why does Islam fear the power of female sexual attraction over men?

> Does Islam assume that the male cannot cope sexually with an uncontrolled female? Does Islam assume that women's sexual capacity is greater than man's ?[71]

On the grounds of the identification of the fear of women perceived at the level of the implicit/unconscious treatment and encompassed by the concept of *fitna*, a conflicted relationship is therefore brought to the fore: the combination of antithetical entities in Arabo-Muslim civilization, the attempt at concording what are believed to be, by the collective unconscious, irreconcilable elements with opposed interests, namely the religious and the feminine, the spiritual and the sexual, God and woman.

It is this problematic and contradictory relation, revealed by the 'unconscious' of this collective imagination which is now explored through the work of Fatna Sabbah.

6. 4. 2. Projecting a Male fantasy: the Sexual Beast

In this section, the focus lies on the inferred image of womanhood as being sexually assertive and independent, a representation of women which culminates in the representation of the female as a sexual beast. Its implication for feminist analysis as a whole is investigated more thoroughly through Sabbah's Woman in the Muslim Unconscious where, following Mernissi, she examines texts from Islamic civilization. She attempts

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71. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 31.

to grasp the principle of female strength - believed by feminists to be undercurrent to the universal projection of females as weak - embodied in the collective unconscious - her portrayal of a specific model of Arab womanhood which emerges from various cultural texts, in other words her model of the 'omnisexual female'. However, some aspects of this topic can be examined more closely, linking female omnisexuality and perversity with a similar image of powerful femininity, rendered by popular imagery, in short the figure of the ogress. This image also derives from a deeply buried male fear towards women. However, while the ogress is a product of an oral culture, the folk tale, Sabbah's voracious female is the construct of a literate discourse, expressed sometimes through erotic fiction, one of Arabic literature's oldest genres, the much celebrated - and appreciated - '*Mujun*'.[72]

Exploring these representations of femininity in an aesthetic or cultural discourse, whether literary and orthodox or popular, that is, whether emanating from a written or oral tradition, is therefore supplemented with the textual delivery of womanhood by the literature projects which projects women through the so-called omnisexual model. The purpose is to highlight another consensus of pan-Arab feminist research on the existence of a potent discourse of subjectivity, that of 'the unconscious', which delivers a recurrent image of

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72. See Bouhdiba's Sexuality in Islam, chapter 'erotology', p. 140.

womanhood in Arab/Muslim culture which reinforces the 'implicit' theory by Mernissi and as a consequence to constructing femininity itself.

In fact, it is interesting to note that the methodology which applies to Mernissi's theory of the discourses on womanhood finds further illustration and support in the debate initiated by Sabbah's' trip into the unconscious which equally spans the various cultural texts from early Islamic history: it promulgates the Mernissian argument about the duality of such discourse and its binary reflection on conceptions of womanhood; in other words it implements the explicit theory through the exploration of a 'legal' or 'orthodox' textuality and, on the other hand, it analyses fictional texts on erotic fantasy. The former is concerned with an authoritative ideological framing of women and their sexuality but the latter offers, on the contrary, a non-ordered view of the world as its sets to liberate the imagination and the libido and free the human body from the shackles of religious morality. It is, in other words, an imagery of the unconscious. Sabbah explains that her book proposes to analyze the messages which two supposedly antithetical discourses imprint on the female body: the Islamic legal discourse, the discourse of power, order, civilization and the sacred; and the erotic discourse, the discourse of disorder, subversion, sexuality, pleasure and the profane.[73]

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73. Sabbah, Muslim Unconscious, p. 18.

The difference between the two kinds of narratives, the religiously based and the literary lies therefore in the fact that the former tries to constrain female sexuality, set its boundaries and rules, and describe its dynamics in accordance with a definite ideology and a certain conception of the world and reality, because 'it is not the work of a person; it is a work of divine interpretation, which imposes itself as the collective, global, total and totalitarian vision of the universe'.[74] While the latter, that is the erotic vision, explodes the boundaries of the sexual sphere, of both males and females, and resorts in so doing to the world of fantasy, mingling the irrational, unlawful and the unorthodox, based on 'an individual reflection [...] on the female body as the seat and agent of sexual pleasure'.[75]

Sabbah also discusses the power problem these opposite textual frames evidently pose in relation to order and the subversive challenge which seems to be inherent in the erotic/fantastic perspective, the genre of subversion par excellence, although the issue of its implication for women themselves as the objects of these 'male' discursive formulations is not tackled. The question is mostly approached in terms of authorship and authorial intention as she explains that, in the case of erotic discourse, the writers 'do not claim to possess the truth nor to dispense it',[76] so in this case 'the

74. Sabbah, Muslim Unconscious, p. 18.

75. Sabbah, Muslim Unconscious, p. 18.

76. Sabbah, Muslim Unconscious, p. 18.

authors' relationship to power is totally negative'.[77] However, she reckons that, 'the orthodox discourse, on the other hand, is the discourse of a god on power and its dispensation; it is the source and origin of a vision that takes total charge of the organization and management of the universe and everything in it, including pleasure',[78] namely it is power. But her presentation of the erotic tradition as devoid of power is rather problematic at least from two angles: firstly, one should bear in mind that erotic fiction or '*Mujun*' is a male literary tradition operating within a phallicized culture so the writers have a relationship to power. Secondly, the divide between the two genres, the spiritual and the sexual, is not so unrelated: some erotic texts of a scholarly nature were written by religious figures who had the task of explaining sexual practice and desire according to God's will and word, sometimes after receiving injunctions from ruling kings and governors, telling them to produce such work.[79] The streak of *Mujun* running through their literary production becomes therefore as orderly as the overall religious

77. Sabbah, Muslim Unconscious, p. 18.

78. Sabbah, Muslim Unconscious, p. 18.

79. Soumaya Naamane-Guessous explains in her book Au-Delà de toute pudeur, how Arabic textuality, from early Islamic times, abounds in studies on erotology which were mostly written from a man's perspective, addressing the needs of the male believer and his sexual pleasure. For instance, she mentions one particular treaty which teaches older men how to regain their youth and their sexual prowess, Ruju'al Shaykh ila cibah, written by Ahmed Ibnou Sulaiman on a royal request from Sultan Selim Khan (the author died in 1573), 229.

context in which it is being articulated. It finally appears that the erotic within the religious text remains as authoritative, controlled and coherent as its ultimate source of inspiration, the Quran itself.

It is however the conjunction of these two opposing genres within the creation of the 'omnisexual woman' which is our main interest here and Sabbah's work offers a unique view of the Muslim unconscious as ideal vehicle for the expression of subjectivity and the implicit perspective as an alternative to the ideological and 'orthodox' framing of femininity and consequently it has relevance to feminist theory itself.

First, it is necessary to summarize the portrayal of this omnisexual woman as provided by Sabbah' description of her, which is reminiscent in many respects of the archetypal female, the ogress. This feminine figure is also projected by the collective imagination reconstructed by scholars and writers, as desirable and repulsive, dangerous and morally unbridled, essentially defined by her unrivalled sexual appetite.

The strength of the omnisexual female lies probably in the fact that she is, like the *ghoula*, so animal-like, libidinous and unruly. Another feature characterizing the omnisexual woman is the fact that she is heretical, the best indication of disruptive attitude towards order and social values. Sabbah comments on the iconoclastic power of this female character, which underlines the rift which seems to exist in the male vision, between God and woman:

> It must already be apparent that the omnisexual woman, moved by the animal force that she has between her legs, can hardly be a good believer, a pious Muslim bound by the faith to be content with one-quarter of a man (Islamic polyginy gives a man the right to divide his favours between four legitimate wives and beside innumerable concubines...). The unreasonable demands of her voracious vagina are going to compel her to launch an attack on all the rules that govern sexuality in Muslim civilization, and especially those relating to heterosexuality, fidelity, social homogeneity, virtue (prostitution is condemned as the worst possible degradation). And finally these demands will push her to a lack of respect for sex roles.[80]

Furthermore, this woman, as excessive and disorderly as her Maghribi folkloric counterpart, the libidinous Aicha Kandisha, is a 'woman-as-body' and therefore 'exclusively physical'.[81] Her physical attributes determine and reflect her emotional and sexual potential so the size, colour and shape of her mouth, for example, correspond to that of her sexual organs. This led Sabbah to refer to this particular ogress as a 'voracious-crack', the word crack having been inspired, according to her, by its Arabic equivalent, which also applies to the vagina itself.

The centre of the omnisexual universe is necessarily the woman's vagina with its relentless attraction to the phallus. She does not see things and people in their traditional order. Her own sexual organs are the object of an overwhelming power and her vagina is prominently

80. Sabbah, Muslim Unconscious, p. 32.

81. Sabbah, Muslim Unconscious, p. 25.

present and active - 'a pole of animal energy' -[82] and Sabbah argues:

> In this vision, the woman's sexual organs - far from being moved by any desire to please the believer or Him who created him, Allah, the Almighty - constitute an autonomous, formidable force, insensitive to all morality and unaffected by any idea of limitation, order, or hierarchy.[83]

Now, the interesting aspect concerning the portrayal of the 'woman-voracious-crack' lies in the use of the animal analogy by the various authors of the tales in which the female character sinks to the level of the animals with whom she is allegedly seen enjoying frenzied sexual sessions. So animals, preferably the ass and even the bear, appear as the only male creatures sufficiently equipped to satisfy her sexual urges. There are number of stories where attractive women, usually rich or famous, would continuously decline the love of male admirers and offers of marriage in order to devote their energies and affection to an ass or a mule. Some married women would also indulge in this obsession if their husbands were too tired for sexual intercourse. It is only appropriate, at this stage, to say that the male partner of such woman, whether animal or human, becomes drawn up in physical terms which parallel the needs of the omnisexual female, that is, as 'phallus-shaft'.[84]

82. Sabbah, Muslim Unconscious, p. 26.

83. Sabbah, Muslim Unconscious, p. 26.

84. Sabbah, Muslim Unconscious, p. 28.

Man becomes defined by the overbearing desire of the 'voracious-crack' female, as Sabbah puts it when she says that 'the penis that men have is not necessarily the one that the omnisexual woman desires'.[85] A man can only feel inadequate in the company of such a woman, hence she detains, perhaps more than the ogress and the European medieval *witches*,[86] the ultimate castrating powers. Adapting, like Mernissi, Freudian analysis to explain the Islamic castration complex, Sabbah portrays an image of masculinity shaped by the sexual urge of the voracious-crack female in her restless, feverish quest for the phallus. Her comment, in that respect, is unequivocal:

> The fear of castration is the fear of not having a penis able to satisfy the omnisexual woman; it is not, in the Freudian analysis, the male child's fear of being castrated by the father for desiring the mother [...]. In the omnisexual sphere, the fear of castration is a heterosexual fear - man's fear of being rejected by woman for having a defective penis, not able to beget the female orgasm.[87]

In the omnisexual universe, the male anxiety is not thus the fear of the father figure, but it is the threat of becoming impotent, not capable of inspiring the female orgasm. Nor is symbolic castration a phenomenon which can be understood in equivalent Freudian terms from

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85. Sabbah, Muslim Unconscious, p. 45.

86. Karen Armstrong presents the medieval witches as females, according to popular beliefs of the time, with the power to castrate or render a man impotent, using a special cream or other witchcraft devices.

87. Sabbah, Muslim Unconscious, p. 45.

another viewpoint, one that explains female passivity as an absence or lack of the phallus and/or in terms of a penis-envy on the part of the little girl. Sabbah's model of womanhood as it emerges from these male fantasies suffers no such psychological conflicts and traumas: the omnisexual female is not, in Freudian terms, a defective male but rather the epitome of femininity and sensuality. She symbolizes female power and woman's victory over man because, produced by the collective unconscious, she escapes the restrictions imposed on the female believer by an orthodox cultural and legal discourse.

By preferring to enjoy sexual intercourse with an ass rather than a man, she inflicts the most humiliating affront on the patriarchal order which values manhood, sacralizes the phallus through circumcision and draws its prestige from the control of females. However the most significant value of the portrayal of woman conceived primarily as the most antithetical 'Other', lies in the frightful power with which the omnisexual female is endowed, expressed by Mernissi's statement that what the Muslim has always most feared represents a dual threat, namely 'the infidel without and the woman within'.[88] The image of woman as voracious-crack therefore represents a serious threat to social order and to the rule of reason.

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88. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 43.

6. 4. 3. The Demonization of Women

This image of the female as demon is rendered by both the beautiful female and the ogress and her corollaries. This latter image more is apparently welded to a process identified with the demonization of women. Even Sabbah's reconstruction of the Arabo-Muslim vision of women as sexually insatiable, the sodomy aspect of their sexuality and the 'castrating' power they hold, well rendered by the term 'voracious' belong to a cultural tradition of representations of femaleness as devilish and demon-like.

It is now this female disruptive power, associated with evil, Satan and enmity, which is read in certain productions of femininity, from both written/cultural and oral/folkloric spheres, which modern feminist writers are bringing forth as part of what has been so far a constant misogynist process, that sees femininity as source of harm and potential destruction. Fatima Mernissi recalls this particular conception of women when she considers the motivations behind male enforcing of sexual chastity to protect man against 'woman and her subterranean silence, woman who engulfs him in a sea of lies and in swamps of sordid manipulation'.[89]

Feminist readings of religious texts also trace indirect references to female evil powers. Such are the practices reported by Mernissi and Naamane-Guessous, according to which the sexual act is surrounded by some

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89. Mernissi, 'Virginity', p. 185.

ritual and religious formulas that the man has to mumble, at his bedside, to shield himself against the potent evil of woman, because 'during coitus, the male is actually embracing a woman, symbol of reason and disorder, anti-divine force of nature and *disciple of the devil*'.[90] Woman is, in that sense, the threatening 'darkness' against which man seeks refuge in invoking repeatedly the name of Allah: 'Dieu, je te demande (de me faire éprouver) ce qu'elle a de meilleur [...] et je me réfugie en toi contre ce qu'elle a de mauvais et contre le mal qui a été mis en elle'.[91] This is therefore read, not only as what has become explicit evidence of female adversity but as a further indication of male helplessness. Woman is also, according to Mernissi, associated with Satan in certain *haddiths* as the prophet of Islam is believed to have declared one day about woman:'she resembles Satan in his irresistible power over the individual'.[92] Mohammed also advised believers not to seek the company of women alone because 'when a man and a woman are isolated in the presence of each other, Satan is bound to be their third companion',[93] which stresses the link between women and the destructive power of Satan himself.

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90. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 113. My own emphasis.

91. Naamane-Guessous, Au-delà de toute pudeur, p. 176.

92. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 42.

93. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 42.

It is interesting also to note that the consensus among feminists on this issue is seen by the affinity of their views concerning these constructions of femininity, written and oral, which all show an analogy between women's animalism and satanism. The famous Maghribi ogress Aicha Kandicha, for example, is mentioned by Fatima Mernissi who presents her as 'a repugnant female demon'.[94] In Moroccan folk culture, she is believed to be a threat to men because 'her favourite pastime is to assault men in the streets and in dark places, to induce them to have sexual intercourse with her, and ultimately to penetrate their bodies and stay with them for ever. They are then said to be inhabited'.[95]

For Naamane-Guessous, woman is coupled with Iblis or Satan by virtue of the legend of the fall whereby Eve is held responsible for the loss of paradise, even if such responsibility is not incumbent on her alone, but on Adam too, in the Quranic version.[96] The writer also evokes the character of the ogress, Aicha Kandicha, who becomes the analogy that associates, in contemporary North Africa, the figure of the much feared mistress as sexual

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94. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 42. It is interesting to note that Aicha Kandisha is sometimes a female devil or spirit or an ogress. Although the more common version of this folk character (at least in Algeria) is that of an ogress who eats men rather than sleeps with them, the threat she poses to them is still of a sexual nature (as argued in chapter two and revealed by various tales about ogresses); there is an association, established in psycho-analysis, between food, the act of eating and sex.

95. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 42.

96. Naamane-Guessous, Au-delà de toute pudeur, p. 227.

temptress and the idea of femininity as source of evil and deceit. The discourse on this ogress reveals the binary vision of womanhood as good/bad or sexual/asexual and thus becomes indicative of the dichotomy of femininity split between the representation of the wife as the essential or 'unapproachable referent'[97] and that of the mistress/ogress as the 'Other', what Bouhdiba appropriately termed 'the anti-wife'.[98] Soumaya Naamane-Guessous discusses the binary conception of women by using the opposition between concepts of 'femme-raison' based on the orthodox, accepted view of woman as spouse and mother and 'femme-vagin', which conveys the image of the omnisexual female and culminates in Maghribi oral literature in the figure of Aicha Kandicha. So 'les voleuses de maris', as mistresses are called by other women represent the negative aspect of femininity and share with their mythical prototype the power of seduction that enslaves men to their charm. The author presents them as follows:

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97. This expression is borrowed from the work of Malek Alloula on The Colonial Harem, p. 17. It referred to Algerian women who lived a secluded life during colonization. The colonial photographer, fascinated by these females, resorted to the use of prostitutes who posed as harem inmates in order to picture them. The former were therefore the 'unapproachable referent' of Algerian womanhood, in the eyes of both the colonial photographer and the post-colonial Algerian critic.

98. The expression of 'anti-wife' is used by Abdallah Bouhdiba in his work, Sexuality in Islam. The mistress or the prostitute is a sexualized female model in contrast to the a-sexual wife, against whom she stands as the negative or decadent 'Other'. In that sense, she is associated with other anxiety-inducing females, the ogress, the 'ominisexual' woman, the 'European' or colonial female figures, etc...

> Ces femmes accusent les 'voleuses de maris', filles perverses et redoutables, figure négative du désir qui trouve son reflet dans le personnage légendaire d'Aicha Kandicha... Les hommes sont donc faibles devant la puissance de ces filles à stature diabolique, et ils semblent en outre ne plus chercher à les fuir, au contraire de la légende.[99]

The contradictory social attitude towards women which, as argued earlier, is split between implicit and explicit views is a recurrent one and surfaces again in contemporary life, more vividly than ever, because of changing sex roles, the advent of a feminist movement and the entrance of females into the job market. The implications of this debate on images of women in the history of Arabo-Muslim cultural heritage, as reviewed in feminist criticism, is not however devoid of further implications for the new Arab woman.

El Saadawi refers the issue of the demonization of women to the universal myth of Eve and Adam:

> Were it not for this fear, no one would have thought of attributing evil, sin and devilry to Eve. For the she devil is nothing but a living embodiment of man's innate fear. Woman who was able through her power and sorcery and seductive beauty to lead Adam into a trap [...] and to be the cause of his destruction, must be an awesome and fearful creature, a terrifying being.[100]

Likewise, she explains the problem of misogyny, so deeply entrenched in Middle Eastern societies by associating it

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99. Naamane-Guessous, Au-delà de toute pudeur, p. 133.

100. El Saadawi, Hidden Face, p. 156.

to the archetypal fear of woman, induced by such demonization:

> Man's hatred towards strong and positive woman is so great that he projects on to her all the ancient fears he has carried through the ages in the deepest recesses of his own self. Thus it is that strength and character in women were considered an irrefutable evidence of evil, deceit, hypocrisy, cunning, obscure designs, readiness to do harm, satanic attraction and seductiveness, sorcery and devilry.[101]

She also stresses the implicit demonization of women on the grounds of the power of their intelligence. She says:

> Woman was stronger in mind and in intelligence than Satan, and was always able to overcome the devils and gods with her wisdom and knowledge.[102]

Nevertheless, it appears, in the light of El Saadawi's comments and other feminists views that, although Arab women share with women world-wide the hostile effects born of the legacy left by Eve to all her female descendants, it remains necessary to consider their case as fundamentally specific, in view of the enduring particular historical and cultural/religious conditions in which their collective past is rooted.

Another specificity of such discursive demonization of women in Arabo-Muslim conception of the feminine is the concept of female intelligence instigated by the

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101. El Saadawi, Hidden Face, p. 157.

102. El Saadawi, Hidden Face, p. 106.

Quran as a significant category in the structuring of female Otherness, bestowing on her 'devilish' values. Feminists have elaborated a criticism of the typically Islamic construction of female intelligence. They highlighted in the process its significance for the demonization of femaleness thus acquiring particular harmful and somehow witch-like powers as emerges from the Holy Book but also from other types of text (erotic, fictional theological and so forth):

> It is important to remember that never is woman's intellectual ability put in doubt. In the omnisexual universe, her capacity for clear thinking is particularly acute when it is a question of destroying the surrounding order. In all Muslim discourses without exception, woman is endowed with a particularly keen intelligence that enables her to understand the system and its mechanisms. Her hostility to the system is explicitly destructive because she is fully conscious of her acts and their imports.[103]

This supports an earlier feminist thesis which asserted that the concept of female inferiority in Islam is an invention of male scholarship. As Sabbah explains:

> This destructive intelligence has a specific name that the Coran itself has instilled forever in the sacred memory of Muslims: the *qaid*, which is a special form of human intelligence. It is female and devoted to the calculated, cold, and permanent destruction of the system.[104]

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103. Sabbah, Muslim Unconscious, p. 32.

104. Sabbah, Muslim Unconscious, p. 32.

The Arabo-Muslim unconscious as analyzed by Fatna Sabbah remains one significant door through which one has access to the mythical past in which a female power, total and unadulterated, is grounded; a power that was subsequently obliterated for centuries to come by male anxieties. By twisting around the tales of the omnisexual female as narrated by men, Sabbah has turned the subversive force of the folktale against itself, showing that these stories, like the more orthodox discursive productions from various periods as reviewed herein, can work in a feminist appreciation of history and a gendered synopsis of the past.

While the work of scholars such as Mernissi, El Saadawi, Naamane-Guessous and others translate explicit views about gender and sexuality, Sabbah's exploration of the literature of eroticism, in a parallel movement to the literature of orthodoxy, disclosed its implicit meaning. Understanding how dominant discourse, in its overt and covert inferences, influences and even shapes the sexual behaviour of women and the prevailing ethics and moralities goes hand in hand with another critical endeavour: confronting the assumption that women's place in the home and their link with domesticity are self-determined. This is contingent on another issue, with respect to the terms of female entrance into the public world, in the post-independence nation-state. It is therefore the object of the next chapter to address such a question. In so doing, it is worth plumbing the implications of the changing role of women from an

ideological viewpoint. To what extent their public role, required by industrialization and urbanization and the terms of their emancipation are constantly undermined by the prevalence of patriarchal ideology of sexuality as described here will be highlighted in due course.

CHAPTER SEVEN

GENDER AND THE POST-COLONIAL STATE

Feminist theory in North Africa and the Middle East at large is essentially grounded in politics. Analysis of how state formation in the post-colonial world shapes the lives of women and how gender ideology determines the terms of female emancipation remain fundamental analytical parameters in more recent feminist research. More than ever, the confrontation between tradition and subversion (as already featured by fiction) comes forcefully into play as the dominant discourse of the developmental state attempts to homogenize conflictual values. The traditional aspect of its ideology derives often from its theocratic origin as well as from its communal ties. It is therefore important to present a brief review of the historic debate about women in relation to Islam before examining the effects that the combination of faith and politics or religiosity and ideology entails for women. The latter is approached only from a conceptual viewpoint which glosses over the specificities and peculiarities that only individual case studies can offer. The approach therefore focuses on the commonality of political discourses and experiences and

the theoretical statements and indictments they raise rather than the differing determinants.

7. 1. Women and Islam: the Perennial Debate

In the light of the intimate relation between women and Islam, it appears that even secular writers feel called upon to identify their position within the ongoing debate. Furthermore, considering the religious extremism sweeping the Islamic world with the force of a relentless tide, scholars' need to advocate their respective conceptions of Islam as whether they see it as a liberating force or a tool of oppression, particularly towards women, became even more compelling. In fact, most contemporary research on women is invariably, in spite of the differences in idiosyncrasies and orientations, articulated from either one of these positions or a synthesis of the two.

Sometimes the work utilizes one line of such debate, that is, it sets out to unearth signs indicating the presence of matriarchies within the ancient social structures of the Arabian peninsula and North Africa in order to support or invalidate the universal image of Islam as patriarchal. For instance, El Saadawi's views support the idea of the existence of a matriarchal order which preceded the rise of patriarchy, literally 'the ascendency of the patriarchal system over the more ancient matriarchal society'[1] in the wake of the rise of

1. El Saadawi, Hidden Face, p. 96.

capitalism and 'the division of society into masters and slaves'.[2] But Fatima Mernissi revokes such claims because as she suggests:

> The important thing is not whether a patriarchal or matriarchal system held sway in pre-Islamic Arabia; the real question is rather to discover which sexual practices Islam forbade and which it encouraged.[3]

And she adds that the orientation of research in these new directions will be valuable as then 'we may grasp the new religion's stance towards relations between the sexes',[4] where the crux of the matter lies, according to her. This assertion, the basis of her research on sexual dynamics in Muslim society, means that her thesis reduplicates one of the approaches mentioned hitherto while it articulates the misogynist takeover of Islamic teachings regarding the regulation of the relationships between the sexes. In a sense, she shares a belief with other female theoreticians, namely that 'segregation and the veil were imposed upon women at a later stage of Islam.[5] Her later work will subsequently provide analytical evidence to support this. Her work has gone several stages, the initial one illustrated by Beyond the Veil, a book marked by a radical feminist stance as it

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2. El Saadawi, Hidden Face, p. 3.

3. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 65.

4. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 65.

5. El Saadawi, Beyond the Veil, p. 99.

unequivocally states that there was female self-determination in pre-Islamic societies in Arabia and therefore the advent of Islam constituted a serious set-back for women. Her second major work Women and Islam seems to contradict this, and stresses the patriarchal manipulation of the sacred text, rather than the socio-political system; the latter position is reinforced in Women in Moslem Paradise.

But, in spite of the variety of approaches and methodologies used, there seems to be a broad consensus among feminist researchers as a whole, whether from Arab or from other Islamic countries such as Turkey, Iran and Pakistan: misogyny is not located in the words of the Quran nor is it reflected by the teachings of the *Sunna*, seen as intrinsically progressive and egalitarian, but derive from a manipulation of the Islamic ideology by patriarchal and conservative forces. Consequently, feminists attack present day uses of religious beliefs to propagate misogynism, by exhorting women to return to domestic roles, allegedly prescribed to them by God. Women such as Nawal El Saadawi argue that the prophet Mohammed's original message about women and the Quranic formulations were more humane and progressive than present day attitudes to femininity.

A variation in this position sees female debasement in terms of the persistence of oppressive indigenous customs, particularly in rural areas, maintained by archaic patriarchal systems which try to obstruct a modernization process whose 'corrupting' Westernization

influence is feared, especially with regard to women and young people. For instance, in her survey of Moroccan women, Naamane-Guessous remarks that Arab customs have become more repressive towards young women and girls than the actual Quran which, at least, stipulates that some responsibilities are incumbent on men vis-a-vis the satisfaction of their wives' sexual needs. The debasement of the female position and the discrepancy between religious practice and social reality can be traced to erroneous interpretations of the holy Book, or the activity of exegesis.[6]

This recurring debate about the sexist interpretation of Islamic discourse as one of the main initiators and causes of women's oppression has become so important that Mernissi, for instance, suggests that is time for women to re-appropriate the reading of the holy scriptures. They may then decipher the discourse from inside its own framework and, in the process, break the exclusive monopoly held by men over the centuries on the meaning of the Book and Tradition. It is believed that this religious interpretation once performed by female scholars, will probably help trigger feminist awareness among women reading Islamic texts and transform their position from passive recipients and consumers of religious discourse into active interpreters and readers. Mernissi argues that 'understanding the sacred texts is an active process, but one which is being steadily eroded

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6. Position explained in Au-delà de toute pudeur.

by the undemocratically elected state'[7] and goes on, specifying the necessity for women to take over such critical activity:

> Feminism, in the context of our contemporary theocracies, means the right for women, as believers, to claim total responsibility for understanding the texts and rejecting the claims of non-elected state bureaucratic religious authorities.[8]

She also detects another factor at the origin of female subordination, namely the institution of the Harem as it developed in the Islamic dynasties: many of the female slaves captured during the expansionist wars of the Islamic empire became concubines, a status which required them to learn artistic kills to entertain the master while the wives were secluded away and denied any learning by virtue of their social position.[9] However, the concubines soon superseded the wives, not only sexually but also socially and politically especially when they started to push their sons towards the throne. The position of the wives then deteriorated but the concept of 'wife' itself was eventually relegated to secondary status. This offers one possible explanation for the origin of Bouhdiba's concept of the 'anti-wife'

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7. Mernissi, Moslem Paradise, p. 2.

8. Mernissi, Moslem Paradise, p. 3.

9. Thesis developed in her other work, Women and Islam. However, because the practice of the Harem was the privilege of the aristocracy and the upper classes, it is difficult to judge its impact over the rest of the population and therefore to assess its relevance to the question being debated herein.

and the man's dichotomized conception of women as either wife or mistress and the necessity to seclude the former and display the latter and 'have fun' with her.

Two broad theoretical standpoints on the topic of women's rights in Islam thus stand out. One line of feminist research has traced the historical oppression of women back to the emergence of Islam. Some feminists argue that before the rise of Islam in the Arabian peninsula and the Maghreb, women had enjoyed a more independent and powerful role in this pre-Islamic culture. The common idea is that the presence of the many goddesses worshipped by pagan Arabia and of female warriors works as an indication of the relatively high prestige enjoyed by women in the old tribal system and a sign of the existence of pre-Islamic matriarchies or at least of a matriarchal trend, although some critics see in these female goddesses only a reflection of the vestiges of a much older matriarchal society that preceded the advent of Islam and still lived on in some of the tribes. This seems closer to the historical social reality of the region since pockets of such matriarchal groupings still exist today (one of them being the Targui tribe located in ancient El-Hoggar, in the extreme south of Algeria). The existence of these more egalitarian social patterns helps perhaps in apprehending the existence, in the past, of lifestyles which gave women more autonomy. This may sustain the idea of a slow 'deterioration' process affecting the position of women over the centuries.

El Saadawi explores the negative image of womanhood in more ancient religions, namely Christianity and Judaism since these older scriptures constituted the source and background of influence for the Quran. But, for her, the problematic of the Islamic teaching lies elsewhere as she focuses on the political and class system as the main factors behind female subordination:

> One of the primary weapons used to keep the revolt of women and youth against the patriarchal system and its values is the misuse of Islam and its doctrines.[10]

And she later adds:

> There is no doubt that the wave of religious fanaticism that has swept many Arab countries in recent years is one of the ways used by feudal and capitalist ruling classes to hold back the movement towards progress.[11]

Her theory of women's oppression is firmly placed in an international context, that of imperialism and in a national context, that of the rise of patriarchy and capitalism which fosters class exploitation, emphasizing that 'the special privileges of men are related to the socio-economic structures of society. When a society remains patriarchal and characterized by class distinctions, men are accorded rights and freedoms of which women are deprived'.[12] Such a claim reflects or

10. El Sadaawi. Hidden face, p. 82.

11. El Saadawi, Hidden Face, p. 85.

12. El Saadawi, Hidden Face, p. 96.

lends support to a widespread opinion in the Muslim world that Islam brought justice and humanism to the way women were treated in the pre-Islamic era considering that it ruled out through Quranic reforms few barbaric customs (although isolated) practised by some tribes, like the burial of baby girls alive and the sexual exploitation of female slaves. It also curtailed male sexual greed and promiscuity by restricting the number of legal wives. In the light of this argument, Islam is seen as a progressive institutional force for women. She rejects the claim that the problems faced by contemporary women (including attempts to force the veil or he *hejab* upon them, polygamy and other restrictions) stem from Islam. Speaking about the attitude of some Western circles, she says:

> For them underdevelopment is not related to economic and political factors, at the root of which lies foreign exploitation of resources, and the plunder to which national riches are exposed. For them there is no link between political and economic emancipation and the processes related to growth, development, and progress.[13]

It appears then that the so-called regression in the status of women is translated in terms of the decline of Islamic culture, of an indigenous patriarchal takeover and the impact of the imperialist aggressions against the Middle East and the Maghreb during the last two centuries.

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13. El Saadawi, Hidden Face, p. i.

However, an intermediary position recognizes the two trends and refers the subjugation of women to a deeply rooted patriarchy which prevailed in the old Arabic and Berber tribal systems. This indigenous order was sustained through the practice of endogamy and was later supported by the early religious prescriptions, interpreted and applied in such a way as to favour patriarchy. In this context, the French anthropologist, Germaine Tillion, refers the seclusion of women, through the Mediterranean area, to the disintegration of the tribal system within urban society and the loss of endogamy and endogenous values that gradually followed this process of detribalization. Seclusion of the female urban dwellers became a necessity for the males and provided them with some reassurance within the household after the loss of the support of their cousin-brothers.[14] The impact of colonization is not, however, sketched out by the author for whom the debasement in the status of women is largely presented as a purely cultural matter. The forthcoming discussion will evidence the fact that the situation of women and their subordination is rather complex and is framed by a number of parameters, beyond the cultural sphere.

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14. Thesis developed in her major work, The Republic of Cousins.

7. 2. Women's Oppression and the State

7. 2. 1. Women and the Post-Colonial State

Woman is at the centre of political theories of the state in Arabo-Muslim history. In fact, such privileged relationship between the female and political principles predates the emergence of Islamic civilization and one needs to go back as far as Pharaonic Egypt to grasp the importance within Eastern cultures of the relation between women and power. The various analytical parameters offered by this review of politicized narratives on women are adequate to the global problematic regarding their exclusion from power as they are based on many shared assumptions. Rather than argue the virtues of any particular analysis, the aim is to offer a preliminary understanding of the state and how it correlates to women and patriarchy.

First, the quasi-systematic exclusion of women from the political process across Arab societies needs to be underlined. This necessarily entails their confinement to the domestic realm since the public sphere falls, in political terms, within the attributes of the state, understood in broad terms. The Arabic term *umma* which refers to the realm of the nation-state and the public sphere is used here as it stresses the non-secular and patriarchal nature of such a system. It indicates the concept of the Muslim nation-state as initially established by a religious figure, the prophet Mohammed, who also became at that time (the mid-seventh century) the first political ruler of an Islamic community. In

the light of this particular notion of political rule, forged in a religious revolution, secularisation becomes an anachronism which seems difficult to achieve without putting into question the tight (and somehow irreversible) link established by the *umma* between the spiritual and the temporal. This may explain why there has never been in the history of the Arabo-Muslim world a clear divide between Church and government as the religious consistently ruled over matters of state, transcending the purely spiritual to embrace the political. The boundaries slowly and painfully drawn between the rule of God and the rule of 'Man' in the Christian West were never established in the history of the Muslim East, and the question of a secular state was never addressed directly, not even with the emergence of left wing ideologies as Fatima Mernissi point out. She consequently claims that 'it is not the fundamentalists who are the absurd ones in the contemporary scene; it is the Muslim Left which believed it could exist without considering the fundamental secular issue - the transfer of power from the sacred to the human, from a transcendent divine being to an ordinary individual living an everyday life'.[15] The secularisation of the state is paramount to the issue of female emancipation as women were constructed as the subordinate sex mainly in reference to the letter of the Quran. A secular state may not, alone, offer the guaranty of all its citizens'

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15. Mernissi, Women and Islam, p. 22.

involvement in the educational process, paid work and the empowerment of females generally as other conditions, political, social and material have to be provided as well but it is nonetheless ideologically geared towards a mobilization of individuals regardless of their sex. However, under *Shari'a* law, women's admission into the public realm remains curtailed as it is conditional and restricted and the *umma* sanctifies the non-access of women to the outside world. This is the general line of argumentation followed by feminist criticism of the state, although Mernissi contrasts the notions of state and the public sphere, seeing them, in the post-colonial stage, as confrontational. The relationship between women and the state, reflected by the degree and nature of their involvement in the public sphere has, for the last fourteen centuries, been fraught with tension and difficulties. An important historical process is disclosed by Mernissi, the 'classic' explanation provided by the orthodox discourse, whether religious or official, as to why women should be excluded from the political decision-process and remain outsiders to the state. According to her, holy formulations were invented to castigate female political activism during the early phase of Islamic civilization, formulations which survive to the present day. Opportunism, self-interest and misogyny seemed to have motivated one particular *haddith*, allegedly attributed to the prophet himself and which stipulates that 'those who entrust their affairs to a

woman will never know prosperity'.[16] She suggests that in uttering 'prophetic' words to castigate and reject women as political actors, the purpose is also to invoke their erasure from the public sphere altogether.[17] She challenges male authority in negating women's voices from the mainstream of history by demonstrating unequivocally that the basis of such authority is not of a divine but of a human origin. By so doing, she produces a postulate regarding the split of the Muslim social space into a public and a private sphere. This led ultimately to the seclusion of women who had then little to do with politics and the world outside.

Her thesis is that the sexual divide occurred at a crucial moment of the birth of Islam and its early attempts at nation-building. Moreover, events which marked the personal life of the Muslim prophet influenced to a large extent the formation of this first Islamic nation and ultimately shaped gender identity. For instance, outstanding male figures who were part of his council exerted a great deal of pressure over his decisions, especially concerning women and institutions such as slavery. It seems that he was constantly hampered in his efforts to establish a principle of universal equality. The messenger of God did not seclude his wives who attended meetings during which he discussed matters of state. The architecture of his quarters also

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16. Mernissi, Women and Islam, p. 3.

17. She is not alone in offering such analyses.

indicated the proximity of the political/public and the domestic/private and the harmonious relationship existing at that time between women and the state: the prophet's apartments were joined by a common wall to the mosque where he used to meet the faithful, conduct prayers and hold political debates. However, Mohammed soon felt invaded by the intrusiveness of some of his followers. In the wake of one particular incident when guests who came to his wedding party to Zeinab overstayed, a Quranic verdict descended on the prophet which will be determining for the future of Islam as Mernissi put it. It split the social space, that of Mohammed initially, erecting an invisible wall between his house, the private realm, and the world outside. Subsequently, this divide of the Muslim space led to a separation between males and females. Sexual segregation, in turn, ultimately fostered female seclusion. This separation also entailed a split between the sexual and the politico-religious, associating women with the former and men with the latter. The critic also confirms her position regarding the debate on the patriarchal resistance to the egalitarian values of the new religion. Because the fate of monotheism was at stake, some juridico-social aspects were modified in favour of male preeminence. This development, the author argues, is confirmed by the occurrence of the Quranic *sourate* number thirty four which chronologically coincides with the rift that had split the young Muslim nation and opposed men to women over issues of sexual behaviour and female rights. The

prophet finally gave in to the demands of the patriarches regarding the confinement of women.[18] Women therefore lost their battle for equality (confirmed by a verse officializing male access to wealth).

While researching this early relation of the feminine to the political, Mernissi focuses on the bipolarity which, in keeping with her thesis, structured Arabo-Islamism in a series of dichotomies. In support of this, a polarization occurred in representations of the feminine: between free women who were veiled in public and who could expect to be respected and protected by society at large and the unveiled females, notably slaves who were treated differently.

The process of nation-building or the birth of the *umma* was marked by the principle of sexual inequality and became constituent of the Islamic notion of state and embedded in its political culture. This entailed an apparently privileged relationship of the male to the public or the political because, above all 'the *umma* conceded him an individual territory of which he would be the master, of which he would be responsible',[19] namely the control of the domestic sphere and women.

During the post-colonial era, Islamic societies underwent a crucial process of political development and state formation after having been quasi-obliterated for centuries by foreign occupation. They started slowly to

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18. Mernissi, Women and Islam, p. 163.

19. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p, 82.

enter as individual entities into the modern age, enjoying a relative degree of sovereignty. As a result of viewing the *umma* in phallocratic and theocratic terms and in view of the Islamic assumptions about women's subservient status and invisibility, any attempt at drawing females into the realm of power and autonomy becomes interpreted by the collective unconscious as a trespassing on orthodox boundaries. Colonization contributed to a strengthening of identifications of women with the family and of men with the *umma*.

Modernization on which the post-colonial state embarked required however women's labour and the investment of female potential in education, industry, administration and so forth, namely, the public sphere. Ultimately, the process of decolonization and nation-building became emasculating and even humiliating in the case of males nourished by tradition who are allocated the exclusive role of providers and heads of the household. The primacy of Arab male selfhood is then eroded and even devalued by the modern state, perceived, at this stage, as a threat to the forementioned principle of male dominance. Interestingly, Mernissi speaks of the 'feminisation' of the male as a result of colonization and post-independence politics of modernization:

> The increasingly preeminent role of the state has stripped the traditionally powerful family head of his privileges and placed him in a subordinate position with respect to the state not very different from the position of women in the traditional family. The head of the family is dependent on the state (the main employer) to provide for him just as women are

> dependent on their husbands in traditional settings.[20]

The archetypal notions of 'mother-tribe' and 'warrior-father'[21] therefore dissolve. The destructuration of the social and the sexual disrupt the hierarchy which so far operated on the basis of male domination and female subordination. This structure was undermined by the access of women to citizenship alongside other men in their families, their fathers, husbands and brothers:

> The metamorphosis of the Muslim woman from a veiled, secluded, marginalized object, reduced to inertia, into a subject with constitutional rights, erased the lines that defined the identity hierarchy which organized politics and relations between the sexes.[22]

Mernissi's theory of the changing status of post-independence women presents the relation between the state and the new women as positive and productive. It implies that men gradually established a conflictual relationship with the *umma*. It is inferred from post-colonial developments in the political and social spheres that men's perceptions of the modern state already involve some latent hostility. The problem that this

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20. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 82.

21. Mernissi, Women and Islam, p. 10. These concepts reflect the Arab principles of femininity equated with motherhood and the land and masculinity connoting aggressiveness. The terms used by the author in the French original version of the book Le Harem politique, le Prophète et les femmes renders more adequately those overtones, especially that of the father: 'la mère-tribu' et 'le père-sabre', p. 18.

22. Mernissi, Women and Islam, p. 22.

situation poses for patriarchy is expressed by Mernissi in the following terms:

> In spite of its continuous support for traditional male rights, the state constitutes a threat and a mighty rival to the male as both father and husband. The state is taking over the traditional functions of the male head of the family, such as education and the provision of economic security for members of the household. By providing a nation-wide school system and an individual salary for working wives, daughters and sons, the state has destroyed two pillars of the father's authority.[23]

As an indication of the extent to which the new state 'emasculated' its male citizens, Mernissi brings to the fore an analogy widely used in Part One, namely the theme of symbolic castration: the state becomes a castrator (replacing the colonial system) in view of its desegregation policies. But Mernissi fails to determine the extent of the state's intrusion in social organization as it elicited complex defensive reactions on the part of men. The symbolic phenomena of feminisation and castration can be seen as part of the emasculation of the male. He was already 'feminised' by the colonial state and now he finds himself further devalued because of his subordinate position under the autocratic rule of the one-party state which emancipates women while withdrawing real power from him. And the situation of redundancy lived by an increasing number of male youths increases the tension. As Mernissi argues,

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23. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 172.

'to define masculinity as the capacity to earn a salary is to condemn those men suffering from unemployment (or the threat of it), to perceive economic problems as castration threats'.[24]

However, her theory suffers from a shortcoming for it subscribes to a view which distinguishes between patriarchy and the state as the two entities appear confrontational. It is difficult though to dissociate the two, governmentality operating at various socio-professional levels in the modern world and the post-colonial state, involving both men and women and different gender interests and ideologies. Moreover, the promotion of women's rights by the modern state is often more apparent than real and has had only a limited impact on women living in rural communities, remaining overall an urban middle class phenomenon in large parts of the Arab region. In addition, the political success recorded by religious parties (although fundamentalism is generally conceived in terms of a crystallization of the tensions created by the modern state primarily in the field of the family) attests to the large degree of influence exerted by communal values and traditionalist ideologies on the state apparatuses. Mernissi does not supplement her overall perspective with such a view because of the definite divide she draws between state and patriarchy. Moreover, the interests of the two are not always contradictory as they tend to achieve a

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24. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 171.

consensus on issues dealing with women and the family. The discussion of the family code which follows is illuminating in that respect.

Mernissi does not raise (not yet), the issue of the communalization of the state and its relation to religious fundamentalism. When she addressed the question in a subsequent work, the issue of religious conservatism for instance is mediated through patriarchal resistance to the de-segregationist policies of the modern state. The oppositional frame state/patriarchy does not however explain fully the problem of religious fundamentalism and its relative efficiency in competing for power alongside more modernist forces. She stresses, however, the role played by neo-imperialism and local power elites in reinforcing extremist responses such as fundamentalism and in making the refuge into the past a healing process. The present socio-economic crisis, worsened by the international context, largely contributes to the alienation process endured by the Arab masses.

The more broadly based analysis carried out by feminist researchers from the Middle East provides a more comprehensive study of the state in relation to women. More specifically, this more recent research shows how difficult it is to draw a clear-cut divide between state and neo-patriarchy. I will merely refer to other works such as <u>Women, Islam and the State</u> which offer a combination of analytical approaches to the state's interference in the household and women's lives and fill

the theoretical void left by an argument such as Mernissi's while it also helps conceptualize the radicalization of tradition and religion in the form of fundamentalism.

A significant factor to bear in mind in discussions of the impact of the state on women resides in the failure of their deseclusion policies and a radical promotion of women's status, especially in rural society.. This is partly explained by the historical development of Arab countries from feudal, semi-feudal or colonial systems to modern nation states. There were few contacts between the post-colonial or post-constitutional governments and rural communities. So women's lives in large parts of the countryside escaped state policies, 'especially the regulation of marriage and family life which remained firmly under local kin control'.[25]

According to the case study presented by Amrita Chahchi, while the state did not penetrate the rural and pastoral communities, conversely, the communal networks gradually invested the governmental apparatus, leading to what she calls 'the growing communalization of politics and civil life'.[26] Moreover, the emancipatory drive of a non-democratic state cannot be genuine nor radical. This led Chahchi to argue that the advancement of women in post-colonial countries did not result from a process of democratization but was rather 'part of the general

25. Deniz Kandiyoti (ed.), 'Introduction' in Women, Islam and the State (London: MacMillan, 1991), p. 10.

26. Kandiyoti, 'Introduction' in Women, Islam and the State, p. 14.

thrust of dirigiste and frequently authoritarian and repressive regimes'.[27] Conversely, the deterioration of women's position in society went hand in hand with the erosion of human rights. This explains why contemporary feminists are fighting their battles as part of wider socio-political movements such as democratization.

The present theorization of the relationship between women and the state needs to be further examined by addressing two major fields of state incursion in the lives of women: the legal sphere, that is, the legislation on the family and the economic domain, mainly development and modernization.

7. 2. 2. Family Legislation and the Status of Women

First, there is the treatment of the family by official discourses which highlights - as argued earlier - the contradictory stand of the state towards the issue of women's liberation.

The main battleground for feminist women in the last decade specifically has been the regulation of the family, directly linked to the codification of female sexuality, reproduction and marital status as well as their confinement to domestic roles and their seclusion. The laws governing the institution of the family derive from the Islamic jurisprudence on the matter, namely the *shari'a*, for extensive rules are provided by the Quran and the *Sunna* on the regulation of family relationships

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27. Kandiyoti, 'Introduction', p. 13.

and interactions between the sexes. The premiss of such legal framing of social relations rests on the differentiation in terms of rights and duties between members of the *umma* to which members of the private sphere, the realm of domesticity and sexuality, have to yield total power. Mernissi sees the focal point in Muslim discourses on the family as the patriarchal principle. Speaking of the prophet Mohammed, she remarks that 'he saw the tightly controlled patriarchal family as necessary to the creation of the *umma*'.[28] It is therefore understood that one of the major concerns of the early Islamic jurisdiction was the reinforcement of the patriarchal basis of the family as she argues that, 'according to [her] reading of the historical evidence, Islam banished all practices in which the sexual self-determination of women was asserted'.[29]

It ensues that female subservience becomes a requirement to be framed within the law and whose violation, through the wife's rebellion or her discontent, can be penalized, especially if its manifestation is refusal on her part to perform conjugal duties, copulation and reproduction. We owe to Mernissi the new definition of female rebellion as crystallized by the concept of *nouchouz* as embedded in family jurisdiction. It is in this sense that feminists outline the fact that the female body in the Muslim theological

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28. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 82.

29. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 66.

doctrine is defined as property and this is further supported by the ownership value entailed by the present marriage laws prevalent in most Arab and Muslim countries. These rules stipulate that the husband is the 'head' of the family and its main provider in exchange for his wife's obedience and dutiful respect for him and his own kin. Although the patriarchal basis of the family was reinforced by Islamic regulation, it appears that the underlying concern of *shari'a* and the wider discursive tradition on women in Arab societies centres on the Muslim concept of female sexuality. The patriarchal requirement to curb female sexuality is paramount in Arabo-Islamism, influencing its configuration of the feminine within the various discourses, whether cultural or legal.

The work of Nawal El Saadawi offers a somewhat different perspective on the problem of women and the family since she rejects the claim that Islam actually contributed to the debasement of females. She establishes, with other feminist theorists, a distinction between customary and state laws (including *shari'a*). The former were forged by cultural and social communal traditions, and are still largely predominant in rural areas and the latter were designed by a legal and orthodox discourse on the family which affected mainly townswomen and urban society. It is to be noted though that, in some cases, the differences between the two sets of values become minimal as they tend to overlap. El Saadawi thus criticizes the manipulation of *shari'a* in

the field of the family because of the interpenetration of communal values and the laws of the state. In her view, in matters of marriage and divorce, the wife becomes subject to the laws of tradition which deprive her, for instance, of the custody of her children or the right to initiate divorce. She describes these laws as 'crimes' and goes on to say:

> Such crimes are perpetrated under the thick cloack of religious, moral and human values, and amidst a clutter of high sounding words about Islamic legislation, the duty of woman, the need to obey her husband and to respect him, the integrity of the family and the future of the children, and a hust of other well-worn phrases, which women are so accustomed to hear.[30]

El Saadawi's explanation is flawed by its lack of criticism of the concrete role played by juridico-theological Islam in sustaining the dependency of women. Moreover, her critique conceptualizes the problem of the family code not as the product of an ideological process, but as an independent manifestation of tradition.

It appears from the passions aroused by the debates on the family code in some countries and the numerous heated discussions on women's rights, that such issues today are in the forefront of the changes introduced into Arab societies where they are initiating new reflections on womanhood. Notably, the interest in family legislation lies at the centre of the concern to improve society, especially in the feminist agenda. It

30. El Saadawi, Hidden Face, p. 206.

represents a significant battleground for women in the Southern part of the Mediterranean who see the promulgation of family laws as sexist and disempowering for women, endowed with the reactionary values of the conservative ideologies embedded in the state. Feminist literature denounces the fact that, in view of the laws regulating their private lives which grant them fewer rights than men, women are secondary citizens and 'minors' in official terms. They are constructed, through the legal discourse this time, as estranged Others. This highlights perhaps what is the most disturbing aspect of the 'woman question' in the Islamic world at large: the victimization of women by the state through its official endorsing of their subordination within the family. Moreover, such legislative texts, as presently drafted, discriminate between citizens bestowing rights mainly on the man and duties mostly on the woman. Finally, feminists, whether theorists or militants, point out that the legal formulations in question contradict the principle of equality enshrined in some national constitutions.

It is interesting to note that Muslim family law represents one of the most stable and constant sources of jurisdiction which have survived the political upheavals of time, re-emerging in post-colonial legislation.[31] In contrast, other areas of the law originate in the legal

31. Tunisia has been the exception as the previous president Habib Bourguiba seemed to have adopted a more genuine policy in emancipating women and therefore wanted the Family Code to reflect the new position of the Tunisian woman.

textuality introduced into these societies by Western occupying powers. In Algeria, for example, the French Napoleonic Code was adopted after independence in many areas. One example of the continuity of *sharia'* in the modern age, is indicated by the similarity between the Moroccan Family Code, usually referred to as the Muddawana, first issued in 1957, and the Algerian Personal Status Code promulgated nearly thirty years later, in 1985. It is also significant to note that colonial powers, in the past, enforced their own rules on the indigenous populations, leaving however, outside their influence, the regulation of family relationships which remained under the supervision of local patriarches. Customary law in this particular case indirectly served to facilitate their control of those communities. This is an idea also stressed by El Saadawi who comments that colonists only changed the laws which they found threatening to their own hegemony.[32] In many respects, the post-independence state followed a parallel policy, as noted by Kandiyoti, in so far as it did not intervene in communal control and was reluctant in disseminating its new laws among rural and pastoral communities or nomadic tribes. In this case too, there was no clash between the communal rules and the principles of patriarchy to which state officials themselves adhered, whether in theory or in practice. According to Kandiyoti, 'the concern with male

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32. El Saadawi, Hidden face, p. 11.

prerogatives' may explain the predominance of traditional values and 'account for the resilience of customary laws and practices in the spheres of marriage and the family as well as the relative laxity in the enforcement of state laws if and when they confronted patriarchal interests'.[33] It may also indicate an attempt at safeguarding Islam's definition of social territories and identities and an allegiance to an indigenous patriarchy. This resilience may be interpreted as a sign of continuity and coherence in a world marked by disruptions. The desire for continuity is expressed by the compulsive need to nurture the so-called cultural authenticity which is symptomatic of a deep attachment in the collective unconscious to notions of identity and alienation or Self and Other.

Although articulating the question from various angles, feminists seem to agree, broadly speaking, on the meaning and the impact which the regulation of family life and social relations acquire in the historical context of Arabo-Islamism. The rigid attachment to *sharia'* in the private sphere, the realm of the feminine, contrasts with the shifting attitudes required by the developments and changes occurring in the public world, the realm of masculinity. Mernissi highlights the antagonism generated by the clash of these antithetical notions when the change induced by modernization affects the social structures:

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33. Kandiyoti, 'Introduction', p. 13.

> All attempts to bring serious breaches in traditional ideology or to abandon traditional cultural models concerning the family are denounced as atheist deviations (given the religious character of the Mudawana, an extension and incarnation of the *shari'a* as *bida'* ('innovations', their connotation negative), as betrayal of *asala* (authenticity).[34]

Deniz Kandiyoti, who also outlines the historic function of the family as an area of cultural resistance in colonial times (as shown notably by the case of Algeria discussed hitherto, in chapter three), speaks of 'the privileged place of women and the family in discourses about cultural authenticity'.[35] Such a process has attempted to find in the closure on the family, during occupation and the present neo-imperialist age, solutions to a crisis of identity. For another critic, Hijab, the resistance of all Arab states to breaking with *shari'a* law, recovered in the personal status codes[36] is due to 'a total interpenetration between Islam and Arab cultural identity and the need to protect the latter from imperialist onslaughts'.[37] In view of the post-modern destructuration of Arab societies and disintegration of their economies under international capitalism and the prevalent conflicts, the resilience of *shari'a* in both its orthodox form or in its merging with customary law,

34. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 135.

35. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 8.

36. Kandiyoti, 'Introduction', p. 5.

37. Kandiyoti, 'Introduction', p. 5.

can then be articulated in terms of an ideology of cultural resistance. It also appears that the strategies deployed to regulate family life and social relations within various contexts, whether determined by the hegemonic West or the power relations already prescribed by local patriarchies, concur to uphold the need to exert social control over females.

However, there is the key-notion of change which will transform the present unequal distribution of wealth, sexual asymmetry and consequently the pattern of the patriarchal family. The implications of this change are potently destabilizing: the materialism of change that requires women's access to paid work and training is bound to clash with the immaterialism and symbolism of their value as custodians of the Arabo-Muslim identity, dominated by hostile outside forces. This argument is deployed with some force in Mernissi's critique as she relates the problematic of change to the moral cohesion of the family as follows:

> A new sexual order based on the absence of dehumanizing limitations of women's potential means the destruction of the traditional family. In this respect, fears associated with changes in the family and the condition of women are justified.[38]

In the context of Arabo-Islamism, change elicits a set of contradictions between the modernist, progressist and egalitarian bases of modernist endeavours and the

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38. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 167.

conservative drive of traditional ideologies whereby the legislation on the family represents only one of the problematic aspects.

Again, there is a need to stress that the impact, positive or negative, of projects of the modern state, combined with those of the foreign institutions and the workings of international political pressures, help bring about and ultimately shape change. It also appears that another issue is raised by the debate about socio-economic transformations, namely developmentalism. The latter represents another field of the state's intervention in women's lives as it draws them through training and salaries to the public world. But such an intervention is flawed at its basis, according to feminist critique:.

> However, although they might wish to harness to economic efforts or simply project a 'modern' image, they would be unlikely to risk affronting the patriarchal sensibilities of their constituents by radically tampering with male prerogatives in the family.[39]

The need to 'protect' the family from the corrosive effect of change is motivated by the useful role it plays in cushioning the negativism born of the economic and political crisis. As Mernissi argues in the case of 'the sexually and politically oppressed Moroccan male', the family provides him with 'a natural outlet for his frustrations'.[40]

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39. Kandiyoti, 'Introduction', p. 13.

40. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 163.

The underlying function of the symbolic value of women is also a political one. El Saadawi speaks of the role of 'sacrificial lambs'[41] played by women in the political arena as they are made to pay with their freedom and right to self-fulfilment, through the personal statute codes, for the safekeeping of the status-quo. She refers to the Egyptian case, so similar to Algeria, whereby 'women lost some of their rights merely because there was a desire of other political forces, governmental and oppositional, to placate the conservative Islamic forces'.

The implications that the notion of modernist change entail for the patriarch are further highlighted by an examination of a typical complex, that of Arab ahistoricity brought about by Fatima Mernissi. Elsewhere, Mernissi addresses the question as to why the process of the political exclusion of females has been so consistent in Arabo-Muslim culture and why *shari'a* has become a perennial legislative device in the Family Code. This complex explains the attachment of the Eastern male to the past, ignoring the flow of time and history, locked in a remote age (mainly the seventh century, date of the advent of civilization for Arabs) but one which hardly bears any resemblance to his present. As she goes on to explain, the outcome of such ahistoricity is the contradictory relationship which is therefore instituted

41. El Saadawi, 'The Political Challenges Facing Arab Women at the End of the Twentieth Century' in Women of the Arab World, ed. by Toubia, p. 14.

between the religious and the political and, more specifically, between cultural identity (acquired in the 7th century A.D) and political identity (subsequently awarded by the post-colonial nation-state). This duality leads to a division in the personality of the individual - and his rights - as believer and citizen.[42] It also appears to elicit tension between the principle of obedience stated by religious belief and the principle of equality and freedom of speech and thought as upheld by citizenry. One consequence of such a development is the negative perception of democracy and, evidently enough, any change in the status of women (considering their cultural role) as a regressive state. Regarding the correlation between women and the notion of ahistoricity, she notes:

> The major obstacle which thwarts women's endeavours for emancipation is the ahistoricity of the Arab identity which views movement and change as states of social imbalance and moral disintegration.[43]

It may be argued at this stage that the Mernissian theory of Arab ahistoricity provides a framework in which to consider religious fundamentalism in relation to women, articulated as a defense mechanism to a threat projected by the 'corrupting' influence of modernist changes and

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42. Mernissi, 'Democracy as Disintegration: the Contradiction Between Religious Belief and Citizenship as a Manifestation of the Ahistoricity of the Arab Identity', in Women of the Arab World, ed. by Toubia, p. 37.

43. Mernissi, 'Democracy as Disintegration', p. 36.

egalitarian ideologies, associated at a deeper level with Western imperialism, past and present.

So, it is interesting to note that, if one applies the conceptual framework offered by Mernissi hitherto, the contradiction between the identity of the individual as citizen endowed with political rights and as believer provided with religious rights becomes, in the case of women, simply untenable: they are defined, in view of the prescriptions of *shari'a*, solely as believers.

The need for female obedience, which incidentally requires 'surrendering the rights of freedom of thought, opinion and expression'[44] becomes therefore logical. Women alone endure the burden of a strict adherence to Islamic identity - compliance and submissiveness being requirements. In the light of the theme of obedience and ahistoricity, the advent of a militant women's movement in the Arab world acquire a deeply subversive character. It is total *nouchouz* and the 'new woman' who sets to disrupt, with her demands for equality and freedom, the Muslim order, whether personal, familial, social or national, is associated with adversity:

> If Muslim women were to reject their role of obedience and their dependence on and compliance with the orders of men, such behaviour would be deemed rebellious and a state of anarchy not only within the confines of the family, but extending to the religion as well, since to challenge the man's authority is the same as contesting the authority of religion itself.[45]

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44. Mernissi, 'Democracy as Disintegratation', p. 39.

45. Mernissi, 'Democracy as Disintegration', p. 39.

There is therefore justification for such an order to frame female subservience within the law and to provide punishment for its violation. The wife's rebellion or her discontent may be penalized, especially if its manifestation is her refusal to perform conjugal duties. We owe to Mernissi the new definition of female rebellion as crystallized by the concept of *nouchouz* and its covert link with the idea of anarchy or *fitna* as she replaces them within the jurisdiction of the family, the concept of nationhood and the politico-religious order where they acquire a specific value.

Bearing in mind the significance of cultural identity in relation to women and the institutionalization of their passivity, it becomes rather significant to note that, when feminists, whether theorists or militants, challenge the legal formulations on the family and the role of women on the basis of their glaring contradiction with the principle of equality enshrined in constitutional texts, they are in fact pointing out the crux of the matter, namely their ahistoricity. They are also addressing the related tension and anachronism the problematic generates between various ideological trends, mainly the pro-democratic and modernist versus the anti-democratic and traditionalist.

Contrary to Family Law, the field of development is judged as being inherently modernist. The next discussion reveals that it is fraught with similar ideological contradictions. It is also an area where the phenomenon of ahistoricity comes forcefully into play and

undergoes a crisis, caught between the dynamism of developmentalism and the stagnation induced by the fear of change.

7. 2. 3. Women, Developmentalism and the International

Discussions about gender in relation to Social Evolutionary Theory are current within feminist critique in the area and in the Third World as a whole. Developmentalism specifically is a highly charged political issue in view of the ideological implications underlying its premiss. It seems to be informed by dual values, using development as both a vehicle for the emancipation of women and as a source of their subordination. This ambiguity is endorsed by the state which reflects the paradox as it attempts to implement both progressive and regressive policies concerning women, that is, promoting their active role and visibility in the outside world while condoning patriarchy's self-acclaimed right to restrict women's movements. It also overtly and covertly reinforces men's self-appointed role as custodians of the family's destiny, by putting forward backward formulations about the family left to the supervision of males. The present criticism does not amount to discarding the 'active' roles which females have within the household where they are both producers and reproducers. Like for motherhood, it is the tyrannical coercion exerted by patriarchy on women to remain within domesticity which is at issue here.

Initially, developmentalism is conceived as fundamental and positive for the liberation of women and their progress. The family was drawn into the arena of modernism, so Mernissi argues that 'modernization and economic necessity are breaking down the seclusion of women, which was the traditional Muslim solution to the conflict'.[46] So, although development is articulated in terms of an essential gap between the forces of tradition and those of modernism, it inevitably shapes positively the terms of female liberation. Although it is arguable to assert that the state improved the status of women, its influence over the family during the early post-independence stage is widely held to have been constructive since it helped undermine and sometimes even break off the patriarchal stronghold on females and alleviate the burden of their duties within the family.

However, although women benefited from the modernist endeavours of the post-colonial state and the undermining of patriarchy in the process, they suffered a number of set-backs because of interference, internal and external, which worked to their detriment. The combination of these factors led to the growing destructuration of the family which affected directly women's position. Feminist literature casts considerable light on the deterioration of women's position and their continuous impoverishment within the general disintegration of society, in spite of the apparent gains and positive

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46. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 164.

changes introduced by state policies which drew women, more particularly from urban centres, to educational and professional networks. It appears therefore that the problems of inequality and poverty generated by the collapse of a traditional system of kinship under the strain of capitalist penetration, state intervention and the demands of the international market contributed to eroding further the basis of patriarchy, particularly the social control of women but led, in the case of the more economically vulnerable female, to more suffering and more dependency as well as the loss of the support of her kin. However, there seems to be a lack of emphasis in the feminist literature on the destructuration of societies due to capitalist penetration prior to their independence from Western powers and to the impact of neo-imperialism on the post-colonial state, in other words, as part of the Western takeover of and control over local economies during the last two centuries. Another factor due to social destructuration because of the interventions of the modern state and economic failures, among other things, motivated the successful spread of religious fundamentalism and the rise of conservative ideologies.[47] This, in turn, has been reflected by the growing communalization of the state. This process which indicates the predominance of tradition and patriarchal values outside and inside the state apparatus marks the initial steps towards

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47. Kandiyoti, 'Introduction', p. 14.

integrating more fundamental ideological views which advocate as their prime target the social control of women. As Kandiyoti suggests:

> Whereas the traditional exercise of patriarchal authority tended to rest with particular men - fathers, husbands and other male kin - the communalization of politics, particularly when backed by state-sponsored religious fundamentalism, shifts the right of control to all men.[48]

The revival of contemporary religious fundamentalism is also translated into the need to return to traditional cultural ideologies and a more 'authentic' past, after the failure of socialist or more liberal economic models and restore traditional sex roles and patriarchy.

The problem seems to be endemic to societies which persist in allocating the traditional role of providers to men alone, as any incursion of women in the domain of the *umma* will help obliterate the 'psychological function of female oppression as an outlet for male frustration and aggression'.[49] The ideological and psycho-social implications of women's massive access to paid work outside the home are rendered potently explosive because of the acute economic hardship suffered by the poorer countries of the Middle East and North Africa grappling with problems of unemployment and burdened by the debt. Again Mernissi expresses such a concern which eventually

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48. Kandiyoti, 'Introduction', p. 14.

49. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 160.

slows down the integration of women into the economy by saying:

> When women go to work they are not only trespassing in the universe of the *umma* but are also competing with their former masters, men, for the scarce available jobs. .. [this] inevitably aggravates tension and conflict because of the scarcity of jobs and the high rate of unemployment among men.[50]

The pressure exerted by traditional ideologies on the economic projects of the modern state operates from within and without the governmental networks. It may be argued that the discrepancy or anachronism is internal to the state mechanism while for Kandiyoti and Chahchi, it results from the communal control which has gradually invested the state in subsequent phases of nation-building and development.

Mernissi argues that the projects of the modern state are restricted by an endemic gender blindness. Scholars who have looked critically at some modernization programmes have assumed that there was failure to account for the effect of policies on the position of women and family structures. The deep-seated conflict between tradition and modernity is reflected in the approach to development adopted by some governments which, according to Mernissi, are unable to grasp the full implications of their economic plans as they fail to account for the social transformations they require, including the position of women. At the root the problem, there seems

50. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 146.

to be an inability to articulate programmes of change from the viewpoint of women's needs. This indicates indicates that 'the family is not yet officially admitted by Muslim rulers to be a crucial focus of the process of national development'.[51] Mernissi explains:

> The development plans devote hundreds of pages to the mechanization of agriculture, mining, and banking, and only a few pages to the family and women's condition. I want to emphasize on the one hand the deep and far-reaching processes of change at work in the Muslim family, and on the other hand the decisive role of women and the family in any serious development plan in the Third World economy.[52]

Feminist theory on the contrary emphasizes those socio-economic projects which target males as well as females and takes into account the specific position and experience of women. In her preface to Women, Development and Survival in the Third World, Haleh Afshar argues that although 'there is an expectation that the process of development and economic prosperity would benefit women',[53] it remains certainly true that development policies are counterproductive when they fail or omit to address women specifically:

> Despite the specificities of women's experience, there is a general agreement that the process of development could benefit women only if and when it addresses the double

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51. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 169.

52. Mernissi, Daily Battle, p. 169.

53. Haleh Afshar, Women, Development and Survival, p. 1

> burdens of production and reproduction carried by women.[54]

It appears that these enduring historical stereotypes which establish rigid interrelations between women, domesticity and reproduction are particularly significant because they distort the relevant authorities' reports and also entail that females become 'too expensive to employ both in ideological and economic terms and pave the way for open discrimination against women'.[55]

In feminist literature, another source of ambiguity and traditional values is represented by the issue of aid.[56] In many countries during the eighties, the situation of women deteriorated because of the indirect intrusion into local politics of foreign aid from such wealthy countries as Saudi Arabia. There seems to be emphasis on the idea that development and the concurrent drive for the reaffirmation of identity through the recurrence of Islamist discourse cannot be fully appreciated without taking into due account the issue of aid. This aid is selective, charged with a political programme that aims at backing the religious schools and parties 'advocating stricter controls on women'.[57] She highlights the paradoxes inherent in aid packages and

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54. Afshar, Women, Development and Survival, p. 2.

55. Afshar, Women, Development and Survival, p. 2.

56. The discussion of aid applies mainly to the countries of the Arab world which suffered most from the collapse of the oil prices in the mid-eighties.

57. Kandiyoti, Women, Islam and the State, p. 16.

politics which, when emanating from oil-rich countries such as Saudi Arabia, work at enhancing the Islamist lobby within the recipient Muslim countries, which excludes females for it pledges their return to invisible roles. The case of Algeria may be a telling example of such an assertion as the fundamentalist party FIS received generous donations from the Iranian and Saudi governments, which allowed its members to lead a large scale campaign for power. According to Haleh Afshar, the deficiency of the aid programmes lies in their early inception as both donor and recipient countries share views of women as consumers and not producers.[58] Although this is evident in aid packages provided by Muslim donors, it is less manifest in the assistance programmes emanating from Europe and North America. But it is argued that Western donor countries attempt to favour strategies of development which are "inclusive of females, although not necessarily in favour of their emancipation." This aid is approached with mixed feelings as its effects are not so apparent. Sometimes, it is received with some suspicion, especially if it targets women. In Doing Daily Battle, Fatima Mernissi provides an interesting account of aid. Money granted by international institutions from the West to Morocco for the implementation of contraceptive campaigns was rejected outright because of its source of origin, the 'imperialist West', instead of being adjusted with

58. Afshar underlines this idea, alongside other authors in Women, Development and Survival.

efficiency and good management to the needs of the female population. It is interesting to note that progressists, usually in favour of modernism, were themselves hostile to the reception of such aid whilst the women, who requested the availability of contraceptive methods, were not even consulted by the male decision-makers. Aid granted by foreign governments and agencies is not always devoid of contradictory elements which work to the detriment of local women.

The conditions of development and structural adjustment imposed by major financial institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF on countries of the developing world as well as the hardship caused by the debt have also led to disastrous results. They have contributed directly to the impoverishment of the local populations, with women bearing the brunt of the failures of development. Afshar has highlighted the systematic and devastating effect that politics of structural adjustment had on local economies and, ultimately the heavy price incurred by women. In her introduction to Women and Adjustment Policies in the Third-World, she states:

> The Third World debt crisis and the International Monetary Fund and World Bank's adjustment policies have compelled many countries to move towards a contraction of public sector expenditure and market-oriented development policies. Women in general, and the poorest amongst them in particular, have borne a disproportionate burden of the ensuing hardships.[59]

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59. Haleh Afshar, Women and Adjustment Policies in the Third World (London: MacMillan, 1992).

The problems attached to gender bias or the stereotyping of women mentioned earlier also informs the interventions of the major financial institutions. For Haleh Afshar, the contradiction informing the economic practice of the state in the field of development throughout the developing world and even of the international agencies operating within its realm is brought forward by basic historical misconceptions about women's role and place in society and their passivity. She comments:

> In many respects, the economic policies of structural adjustment embody the classic misconceptions that planners have had about women, either not seeing them as economic agents at all, or merely labelling them as profligate consumers.[60]

Women are also the victims of international capitalism in social terms. Kandiyoti for instance attributes the destructuration of local communities to the infiltration of capitalism, which led to an 'aggravation of social inequalities and a weakening of kin solidarities'.[61] Mernissi outlines the destructive effect of the politics of the world market on women, especially the poorest. She surveys the situation of female carpet weavers in her native Morocco, and concludes that the deterioration of the status of these workers and the loss of their personal autonomy was largely due to the demands of world

60. Afshar, Women and Survival, p. 5.

61. Kandiyoti, Women, Islam and the State, p. 13.

capitalism which dislocated the peasant economy in many countries of the Third-World. Gender identities and sex roles are shaped by the requirements of economic progress striven for by the poorer nations which, more than ever, experience the problem of dependency on the international market. Even the oil-rich countries of the Middle East are not unaffected by the effects of the world recession and the interference of foreign politics and institutions. The Gulf crisis which resulted in huge expenses, making some of them, especially Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, for the first time resort to borrowing money; it also pushed them to massive sales of arms and to various investments in military related equipment and expertise. New social and political developments occurring in the wake of the crisis are directly affecting the status of women.

This has led to a re-relocation of the issue of development and women more firmly within the wider problematic question of the North/South conflict, inserting the 'women question' into an anti-imperialist context and an anti-colonial discourse, alongside problems of class and poverty. While most feminist writers agree on the material basis of sexual segregation, some of them tend to articulate the liberation of women in terms of an overall project, that of the economic development of the Third-World. For instance, El Saadawi remarks:

> The economic exploitation imposed on the Arab countries not only leads to a systematic

> plunder of their resources, but also imposes upon them the double moral standards resulting from the contradiction between the commercial values of capitalism and the religious values inherited from the past.[62]

This quote stresses a significant predicament: antagonism is generated by a modernism which is associated with Western capitalism and imperialism and pave the way to a return or resurgence of ideologies of tradition welded into cultural authenticity. The extremism of movements claiming allegiance to moral and religious values, a typical manifestation of this quest for cultural authenticity, is understood as a response to the aggression of the West towards the region. This is especially true of North African countries where the violence of religious extremism has been fuelled by the economic and political failures of the ruling regimes and the hegemony of the West as exemplified during the escalation of the conflict between Kuwait and Iraq and the eruption of the war in 1992.

A significant indigenous faction which plays a substantial role in imperialist politics and which is the object of fundamentalist and popular anger is what feminist critics have identified as the compradore class. The local bourgeoisie and part of the ruling elite play an outstanding role. These are sometimes the mediators between their respective national economies and the international market. Progressist and feminist scholars highlight their destructive impact on the process of

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62. El Saadawi, Hidden Face, p. 87.

national development with increasing concern. The Algerian sociologist Oussedik speaks of the strategic integration of the Arab social elites into international capitalism on an individual basis as local collaborators and not as a unified front which might jeopardize Western material interests.[63]

Finally, in the view of some critics such as Kandiyoti, the interplay of a number of factors and programmes, internal and international, is not necessarily negative as elements of support for women's active role is sometimes prescribed by the targets set by those projects such as international capitalism, class, ethnicity, statehood and patriarchy as 'their operations can be antagonistic as well as collaborative'.[64] The problem lies mainly in the resistance they encounter from local influential conservative groups which are anxious to maintain women in subordinate positions. However, Mernissi and El Saadawi seem to condemn in a more systematic manner the involvement of international bodies in the economies of Arab states. They outline the added negative pressure that internal traditional forces have over female emancipation. Mernissi sums up the issue of development:

> One must examine the relations of production as well as the relations of reproduction, the problem of illiteracy amongst poor women, especially rural women, the problem of their exclusion from training and from the modern

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63 Oussedik, 'Research on Women' in Unesco Research, p. 114.

64. Kandiyoti, 'Introduction', p. 17.

> sector, as well as the link between all this and prostitution. It is therefore necessary to look at the problem of the sexual services rendered by women of the lower strata as commodities in a patriarchal economic market dominated by the collusion of international imperialist forces and local compradores.[65]

Moreover, the capitalist transformation of the mode of production in the wake of development has had an uneven impact on the lives of women. She formulates that contrast mainly in terms of class and rural/urban divides:

> While upper and middle-class women have generally benefited from the increased opportunities made available in the areas of education and employment, those of rural, and urban poor backgrounds have, on the other hand, suffered a decline in their status as they lost the productive role they traditionally played in the pre-industrial economy as the goods they produced were replaced by imported or locally produced factory ones.[66]

Broadly speaking, for Mernissi and most of her counterparts inside and outside the region, the situation lived daily by women is enduringly connected with the prevailing context (national and international), whether political or economic. The solutions which feminist women and scholars offer in the field of development are articulated accordingly.

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65. Mernissi, 'virginity', p. 191.

66. Amal Rassam, 'Introduction', Unesco Report, p. 9.

7. 3. Political Solutions to Female Oppression

Education appears as the privileged route of emancipation and progress favoured by women and the first requirement in their struggle for equality. While Algeria has one of the lowest figures of female employment in the world, Morocco has a very high number of female workers in subservient jobs, mainly in the civil service, domestic work, agriculture and factory work.[67] This is due to a 'lack of education [which] forces most women into subordinate positions under men's supervision, hardly different from their traditional situations'.[68] So the issue of female education becomes a high priority on the feminist agenda as it can ensure women's access to more professional skills. The Algerian academic Fatiha Hakiki widened the debate on women and work by studying the value of housework and her analysis looks at domestic work from the perspective of development, starting from the current premiss that housewives are not conceived of in active terms as workers contributing to development. She re-defines housework as unpaid labour, performed by an army of invisible workers, so far projected only as consumers and whose role in the development process of their societies needs at last to be 'quantified'.[69]

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67. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 159.

68. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 158.

69. Paper (basis of a thesis) by Fatiha Hakiki, 'Travail domestique et salariat féminin: essai sur les femmes dans les rapports marchands, le cas de l'Algérie' (Oran: University of Oran, 1983); paper by Nadia Mehdid, 'La quantification du travail domestique en Algérie' (Algiers: University of Algiers, 1989).

Feminist theorists, whether from Maghreb/Machrek or from Islamic countries such as Iran, Turkey and Pakistan have contributed in a valuable way to an understanding of the state. They have studied the impact of its mechanisms on women as they contribute to their subordination or help to liberate them. It enhances their invisibility through its adherence to patriarchal principles, mainly via the jurisdiction on the family. On the other hand, it promotes their emancipation and autonomy mainly through schooling and female employment.

Although the drafting of family legislation was perceived as an incursion of the state into the domestic sphere and one which had negative repercussions on the lives of women, feminist work seems nonetheless to establish distinctions between the effects of these legal and socio-economic categories in the case of females. The former aim to maintain them as the subordinate sex while the latter tries to liberate them from the confines of the home by exhorting them to adopt active roles in the public world, trying to harness their potential for the development process. The main paradox thwarting the political agenda of the state derives from this unresolved clash:

> Unnecessary confusion and anxiety stem from the fact that the government supports the traditional ideology and enforces it as law

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This paper was later published. Also by the same author, 'Emploi salarié et travail domestique' *Cahiers du C. D. S. H.* (1980).

> [family legislation], while its economic plans and programmes promote a different reality.[70]

This extract confirms Mernissi's concept of the state as it manoeuvres to reconcile its modernistic infrastructure and its traditionalist superstructure, the former encouraging desegregation and the latter promoting the patriarchal trends of the family. This conflict between traditional ideology and the modern state reproduces the dualism of pan-Arab thought and may be further interpreted as a confrontational meeting between theocracy and democracy or, on the other hand, between Islamism and secularism or even femaleness and maleness. It appears then that the political agenda is marked by confusions and state intervention is influenced by a set of paradoxes. The major paradox is investigated in the course of this chapter is that the development projects tend to be progressive whilst the legal formulations on the family and women remain conservative and regressive. The implications conveyed by such a discrepancy for feminism and popular representations of women will reflect such a contradiction. The dichotomy informing the practice and ideology of the state also implies a separation between production and reproduction.

It is important to replace the discussion on underdevelopment firmly in the anti-imperialist agenda as it constitutes an important part of the common struggle led by feminists from most countries of the South. In

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70. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 170.

1987, some feminists from the Third World addressed the chief negotiating conference of North and South, UNCTAD VII as follows:

> We reject enforced adjustment which increases social and gender inequality [...] We see development as indigenous, democratic, sustainable and local, in which women as well as men have rights and dignity and economic self-determination.[71]

And further:

> We need visions and strategies in both the North and the South. Women world-wide are trying to reverse the destructive policies of the current enforced 'development' model.[72]

The conceptual framework forged by their various analyses of development in the light of a gender, class and race perspective is summed up by the review Spare Rib where the development model imposed on developing nations is virulently castigated for being 'Eurocentric, male-oriented and anti-development'.[73] The general criticism levelled by a number of Third World scholars, both male and female, against developmentalism is articulated in the following:

> 'Development' has come to mean a 'choice' of the Western style of life, in particular, modern production and consumption patterns.

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71. Ursula Paredes and Georgina Ashworth, 'Development Crises and Alternative Visions', Spare Rib, no. 210 (March 1990), pp. 23-25.

72. Paredes, 'Development Crises', p. 25.

73. Paredes, 'Development Crises', p. 23.

> Its entire ethos is Eurocentric. 'Development' has come to mean enforced global capitalism, and as such simply another means of colonisation of the Third World.[74]

This statement is largely echoed by feminists elsewhere. In an interview, El Saadawi sharpens her condemnation of international capitalism as the main oppressor of both male and female individuals in the Arab region where the rich oil monarchies collude in the new forms of colonization.[75]

But there is broad agreement among feminists about the role of economic power and the building of a material basis for women in attenuating the harshness of tradition and reducing their subordination. Liberating endeavours are articulated in terms of the overall modernization projects, although there is a growing concern that these programmes are far from being women-centered and are, on the contrary, increasingly endorsing patriarchal interests, especially in the case of those who are most disadvantaged, in terms of material welfare and access to resources.

In this sense, it is quite significant to underline the fact that feminist academics such as Afshar speak in dynamic terms of the active, often highly resourceful alternative strategies of resistance and survival pursued by women, an approach which breaks with a Eurocentric imperialist tradition welded in representations of Third

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74. Paredes, 'Development Crises', p. 23.

75. Marcel Farry, 'In conversation with Nawal El Saadawi', Spare Rib, no. 217 (October 1990), pp. 22-26; p. 25.

World females as essentially defenceless and passive agents, living with the expectation that foreign aid falls in their laps as the remedy to their suffering. At the other end of this scale, there is the picture of Middle Eastern females as wealthy customers of the most exclusive and expensive fashion houses and shopping malls of Western capitals. Both images, in spite of their apparently oppositional message, one of desperate poverty and dependency and another of wealth and waste, still convey a unified portrayal of these women as dependent consumers. The adequacy of the present debate on development in relation to women is further underlined by the author who states:

> Women's position is structured by a double set of determinants arising from relations of gender and relations derived from the economic organisation of society and that it is necessary to understand the dynamics of capitalism and imperialism to grasp the complexities of the structures that shape the subordination of women.[76]

Solutions to female subordination are to be sought within the realm of the state which can guarantee a process of political liberation, democratization, the shaping of a new model of female citizenship and the initiation of social and economic reforms. Hence the overriding importance of the post-colonial state and ideology as analytical categories in feminist scholarship. There is emphasis on the deeply political nature of feminist

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76 Afshar, Women and Adjustment, p. 5.

expertise in the countries of the Middle East and the Maghreb and the emergence of feminism in the region primarily as social theory and political practice.

In the feminist battles, democratization becomes a prerequisite for the liberation movement. Democracy entails an overstepping, by both males and females, of the private/public divide and needs to free itself from the traditional discourses on female sexuality where it generates stagnation at all levels of socio-economic life. Feminist struggle becomes part of the drive for change and equality, of the thrust for modernity and prerequisite of the modern state. One apparent obstacle however for the constitutional government resides, especially where its adoption of emancipatory policies for women is concerned, in the reaction of male traditionalists. The latter condemn the imperialist infiltration of the state because they see it as being Western originated. This leads them to question the validity and motives behind its promotion of female liberation. For the most powerless males, Islam becomes the alternative route for a fairer system and social justice. It is also a 'vehicle for popular classes to express their alienation from 'Westernized' elites'.[77] Individuals are not however uniting solely around the religious referent but also across gender, class, ethnicity, ideological or professional boundaries. Islamist women, for instance, because they join the ranks

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77. Kandiyoti, Women, Islam and the State, p. 8.

of the fundamentalists and adhere to their principles of an Islamic state, seem to express solidarity with these men although many of them claim that the *hejab* allows them to go unnoticed, escape harassment and give them room to work out their own agenda in a male dominated world. Hence the difficulties for feminist militants and thinkers and 'secular' females to keep the issue of women's rights on the political agenda and to unite all women around a common struggle. Moreover, the presence of the female *mutahajibat* only reinforces their own visibility and therefore vulnerability in the street.

The historical development of some Middle Eastern nations such as Turkey, Iran and Algeria in more recent times, reflects, sometimes in a dramatic manner, the present predicament, illustrating its political implications for the position of women. This is particularly relevant to a country like Turkey whose history since the *tanzimats* during the mid-nineteenth century was characterized by 'Westernism, nationalism and Islamism'[78] and where the middle classes tend to be secular, striving to achieve Westernization, exacerbated by their present attempts at joining the European Common Market. The Turkish masses who more or less remained isolated from progress and the political process turn to Islam as the only route of escape from poverty, exploitation and the increasing alienation imposed on

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78. See article by Deniz Kandiyoti, 'End of Empire: Islam, Nationalism and Women in Turkey' in Women, Islam and the State, ed. by Kandiyoti, pp. 22-47.

them by the military junta and the compradore class. But while Turkey has undergone intense Westernization as a particular response to the need for development and modernization, raising with acute urgency the issue of its 'cultural authenticity' and of the nature of its nationalism in the eyes of the traditionalist forces, Iran, on the contrary, has entered, under the ayatollahs, a period of Islamification, validated by its self-identification with its cultural and historical roots. Turkey and Iran thus appear as microcosms of differing developments occurring elsewhere and could be then usefully read as examples of the apparently confrontational processes mentioned above, that is, Westernization and Islamification. On the other hand, the two countries are considered to be respectively prototypes of Middle Eastern nations facing the problems and contradictory political forces which are typical of the region. So the scholarly works of women from these countries have qualities which go beyond their immediate value as political accounts of singular cases: they can provide analytical parameters which are applicable to the region as a whole.

Finally, the feminist debate on ideology and politics in the Middle East and the Arab world at large suggests that solutions to the subordination of women require various conditions. Most feminists agree that the socio-economic situation of the countries concerned and of the Third World as a whole needs to be fully confronted before any improvement in women's condition

can be achieved. Poverty, unemployment and bad conditions of housing and living are the lot of a growing number of women, so it is urgent that the development process becomes sustained and productive, health care and contraception free, available and unconditional and for the distribution of wealth and resources to be fairer, facilitating the integration of women into the development process. In the socio-political domain, addressing the 'women question' amounts to the improvement of civil rights, the abrogation of the present family codes based on sexual discrimination, the implementation of democratic reforms, the struggle against illiteracy, the spread of education, the promotion of secularism and the access of women to the decision-making process and parliamentary representation.

Essentially, other parameters of women's liberation and self-realization are located in the creation of a new international order - more just and humane - which will resolve the conflict between North and South not just in political but also material terms as it will provide fairer trade relations, remove the threat of imperialist wars and eliminate the problems attached to the debt which are presently draining the resources of the region.

Other major political conflicts in the region take their toll on women's lives and their families. They have become the increasing concern of feminists, such as the Lebanese civil war, the aftermath of the Gulf war catastrophy, the presence of the Zionist state of Israel and the reality of the Occupied territories where

Palestinian women and their families live a daily struggle for survival, under the constant menace of deportation, imprisonment, death and torture.

Finally, it may be argued that recent feminist debates on the relation between the feminine and the political recorded a substantial move away from a more conventional metaphor of the state. Moreover, the lack suffered so far by such studies, that is, the insufficient theorisation of the state has been corrected to some extent. The state no longer appears in feminist critiques as a monolithic, unexamined black box of outside oppression, control and fear. This would have been relevant (for the most part) for the colonial period, but not for post-colonialism and the pre-industrial age in the region. What research by women in the field of politics has also successfully fed in, is a notion of governmentality, that is, of how the state functions at a political and personal level (including inside people). The state, in the governmental sense, is a series of practices carried out in bureaucratic hierarchies by professionals (elite at the top), down to clerical grades (in the capital) and down to local elite functionaries. This is the first level where, even in colonial contexts, particularly in the protectorate, the local population is involved as officials and professionals. But how does this order affect the local population? Governmentality of the form emergent in the past 150 years is run by professional-managerial classes, that is, the educational elite with qualifications from

the new state. It therefore comes into the post-colonial context as a new power-knowledge formation which undermines the old ways of Islam at many levels, which are cultural, political and individual, in the sense that governmentality is about constructing a new form of individual (disciplined and expert in disciplines). Thus the old culture is under threat (as feminist work and the present thesis underline) and in a sense 'feminised' by the new phallogocentric power of the modern Western apparatus. This is why there is the double 'need' to treat women as purely feminine, the old cultural patriarchal tradition plus the new pressure induced as the old patriarchy is now put into this feminised position. But what then gets omitted perhaps in the analysis is the way in which certain women derive a new power from the new disciplinary/governmental world: precisely those women most targeted by fundamentalism, those who acquire education, qualification and thus the right to operate within the governmental world. These women short-circuit the old patriarchy by becoming (to the patriarches) powerful figures in the new elite world (even if their actual power is compromised by being women, subject to discrimination and even harassment). The ambiguous role of such a female is what still needs to be brought about perhaps more fully: precisely because this kind of woman is no different in background and training from the women who write as feminist critics and novelists. Otherwise, feminist work reviewed so far works in its own terms for the older period and as a

sociological and political account of much of the everyday reality of women, that is of 'Other' women. In this sense, it is just not a sufficient analysis to fit with what the overall perspective of this thesis is trying to establish, since the underlying critique is engaged in covering both the 'Other' women and the reflexive and ambiguous siting of educated elite women. This is something that one notes as a huge silence in the work of some academic feminists who talk about issues of oppression and resistance, but only with reference to 'Other' women, those not like themselves. They tend to remain a silence in their own texts. A wider exploration of terms like governmentality and of constructs such as the nation-state may enable to bring that off. The practices of governmentality in the modern age derive from the disciplinary activities of the Western educational world, which have now become ubiquitous, world-wide, even as they are mediated into varying specific surface forms in each new cultural/national context.

The political resistance by women to the patriarchal designs of the state is enhanced by strategies of liberation fostered by the scholarly work of feminist thinkers. These discourses and politics of liberation are inscribed within analytical and theoretical frameworks that are informed by specific conditions and problematic categories. In the forthcoming section, there is a preliminary attempt at reading some of these conditions. Questions are consequently raised with

regard the relevance of the various methodologies used in the arduous process of 'finding a voice'.

PART THREE

TOWARDS A THEORY OF POST-COLONIAL FEMINISM: THE CASE OF PAN-ARAB FEMINISM

CHAPTER EIGHT

FINDING A VOICE

8. 1. The Mobilization of Women

The movement for women's rights has undergone several phases: an early modern wave started to develop, mainly in Egypt, at the turn of the century, with a substantial contribution from male political reformists. But this movement of early Egyptian, Lebanese and Syrian feminisms was largely revoked for its elitism and class bias. It helps nevertheless to set the historical frame for the woman question in the Arab world, currently determined and shaped by socio-political upheavals and the struggles for national liberation.

Feminist activism is best typified by the women's movement in Egypt where it made an impact on the political scene following the early struggles for self-determination and independence. In addition, similar developments of other feminisms in neighbouring countries, Turkey and Iran, attest to the fact that the state and women together with various pressure groups, whether religious, right-wing or oppositional, were consistently engaged in various battles and debates. Women's groups made alliances according to a protofeminist agenda in all these cases. This remains

the prevailing pattern as shown by Algerian feminists today who were eager to rally the democratic forces and ally with the secular parties in order to promote the cause of women and counteract fundamentalist mysogynist militancy.

In the past, the controversy on women's rights was epitomized in Egypt by the occurrence of radical politics that the country had witnessed between 1939 and 1954. Likewise, the Palestinian and Lebanese resistance, more recently, made women aware of the significance of their role, and they started to organize separately, while maintaining communication and negotiation with the male dominated groups. The Palestinian cause has acquired, in that sense, a powerful voice in its prominent female representative, HanaAshrawi whose fight for Palestinian independence helped galvanize the movement.

There is presently a particularly strong mobilization of feminists to confront the resurgence of religious fundamentalist groupings. Some of the discussions taking place between them are not necessarily set by international organizations, such as Unesco which held a series of conferences during the seventies what it called the 'Decade for Women'. A significant breakthrough was achieved with the advent of the 'Arab Women's Association' which organized the first major feminist conference in the region in 1986, independent of any political or financial institution or governmental frame and without the initial approval of the authorities concerned. This helped bring the feminist movement at

last to a much needed stage of organization and to create a much desired frame in which Muslim and Arab women from all corners of the Middle East, the Near East and the from the diaspora could meet and exchange views. Today, women are effectively organizing and current governments in the region can no longer ignore the 'women question'. In some places, Algeria and Egypt for instance, the feminist agenda has been firmly pushed to the forefront of the political debate, especially in view of the resistance women are met with in the programmes of sexual segregation adopted by religious parties, mainly the Algerian FIS and the Egyptian Islamic Brotherhood. In this context, the organization of what feminists themselves called their 'first typically authentic feminist conference'[1] was considered a revolutionary initiative and a landmark in the historical development of the region: it occurred at a particularly difficult juncture, marked by internal political divisions and economic pressures whose scale and intensity were unprecedented, sharpened by an equally trailblazing involvement of the West in the affairs of the region. In the words of one pioneering feminist, Nahid Toubia, the 'Women's Solidarity Association Conference' held in Cairo in 1986 meant that, at last, 'a dream became a reality'.[2] She later published the proceedings, attended by participants from sixteen Arab countries as Women of the

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1. Nahid Toubia (ed.), Women of the Arab World.

2. Toubia, Women of the Arab World, p. xi.

Arab world. In her introduction, she stresses the specifically feminist character of the conference and the political commitment which led to its creation before describing her enthusiasm for this major feminist event:

> To me, feminism is foremost a 'feeling' - of which I am not ashamed. It is the state when women no longer suppress their feelings of anger and love, of rage and ecstasy, of revenge and beauty. It is when women feel free to use their immense emotional energy to explore and redefine their position in the world. it is when they use their intellect and wit, education and skills, and their rich heritage of knowledge and wisdom to redesign their role in the past, present and future of humanity.[3]

Among the contemporary feminist writers who have made a breakthrough into international forums are Nawal El Saadawi from Egypt and Fatima Mernissi from Morocco. With other feminists, they constitute the contemporary wave of modern feminism in the region.

But the question arises as to whether the word 'movement' applies in the context of discussing feminist work and women's demands in the region. I would firstly suggest that it is still adequate to refer to the present struggle of women in its empirical and intellectual aspects as a movement because it is increasingly gaining in coordination, organization and, more importantly still, in efficiency while addressing issues of female subordination. Caroline Ramazanoglu, in her own appraisal of what she calls new-wave feminism in the West, raises the difficulty of defining it as a movement

3. Toubia, Women of the Arab World, p. xii.

and in encompassing all the works of feminists produced over a period of twenty years into a single entity or a wholistic assessment. So, this remark equally applies to feminist struggle mainly because of the difficulty of gathering material scattered over various places noting its plurality and diversity linguistically and the terms of its availability, publishing and distributing inside or outside the area under study.

There is now an increasingly radical and theoretically defined pan-Arab feminist struggle that best expresses itself in the critical writing of certain women. It also expresses itself in the emergence of women's organizations and feminist associations operating outside the influence and stronghold of political parties and also often outside the realm of the local state.

8. 2. Developing Academic Feminism

The study of feminism is fragmented. like the pattern of feminist voices themselves. All such studies have to face up to the constraints which have shaped indigenous femininity. The process of writing the 'Arab woman' reinforces the sense of fragmentation and rootlesness and thus the textual comes to reflect the contradictions and struggles of the inner world and the material as well as the socio-political reality of women as a whole.

In this thesis, I have attempted to trace the new awareness which informs research by women on women and to

show how this may not be regarded just as a painful process of self-discovery in negative terms nor a re-establishment of ties with traditional modes of representation, but instead may serve through a recollection of the various scattered experiences of women in the search for a writing self, which may or may not be a 'unitary' self. This search has become an important condition of living for many women, expressing itself in many fields extending from the written to the verbal, and for the masses of women in the South, developing strategies of survival for themselves and their families, and needs to be acknowledged.

Pan-Arab feminist work, examined across a fairly broad basis, displays general specificities which are not merely sweeping statements about the lot of Arab women, so common in many Western texts on the subject of women in Islamic societies.

The present study has tried to argue that the term 'feminism' is a focus for discourses in different fields and that women have therefore found different, often overlapping, but never univocal voices. These also encounter different forms of resistance. It is also important to stress that there can be no single definition of feminism here, only regularities can be drawn out. The point is that the discourse of feminism has enabled women to find voices that subvert or transgress the tradition, namely the male Muslim/Arab framing of women and femininity. This is illustrated in a twofold movement from sexuality as conveyed by

fictional and cultural texts (oral and written), and from politics and ideology. Both contribute to the shaping of women's identity, her place and role in the world. It is also interesting to note that while sexuality may be formally associated with femininity and the private sphere, politics, on the other hand, is firmly situated within the public realm, or the traditional world of men and masculinity.

Post colonial feminist work revolves around a reading whose concept appears to differ from that of Western feminist theory at large: it articulates a perspective conceptually inscribed within what may be termed 'vaginocentrism'. It appears from the feminist reconstruction of gender relations that female sexuality stands out in a particular way, and a great significance is given to the notion of female desire and the erogenous female, reflected by the prominence, (physiological and symbolic) attached to female genitals. It is one of the key messages read by feminist critics into cultural and social discourses. The underlying idea suggests a fear of the power of attraction of an active vagina, around which is organized the sexual, social and even the political order, and male fears such as the complex of castration and the threat of impotence which were seen to be so paramount in Arabo-Muslim writing (the 'Arabian Nights' were indeed one such instance). This process, identified as 'vaginocentric' can be detected in the implicit literary and oral/folkloric forms and expressive modes of an old cultural heritage. Here, we are far from

the phallocentrism of Western culture, the subject of Euro-American feminist research. Through the review of one female archetype, that of the woman-ogress, the omnisexual or the *Jahiliya* woman, feminist theorists have tried to identify something 'Other', foreign to the cultural context in which mainstream First World feminist criticism developed. That 'Other' is a cultural discourse in which the women/female has been a power source and object of male fear.

The discourse is 'cultural' because it is more than literate/literary. It inhabits both sides of the oral and literate divide: as indicated earlier, it has flowered in oral folktales in literate versions/reworkings, learned often at the mother's knee. The fictional voices discussed in chapter four tried to articulate both perspectives, the oral and the textual, as expressions of a similar phenomenon and a mode of expression, profane and/or scholarly, for the ways through which sexuality grows into a significant field where feminist and personal battles are led. It also represents, in fictional terms, the more explicit/conscious and deliberate articulation of female subservience by a patriarchal society. But this has led to efforts on the part of men to repress that power embedded in an active expression of female sexuality. So, it is a genuine cultural difference needing to be marked off from the 'phallocentrism' which has been, broadly speaking, the object of feminist work elsewhere.

Two major points thus seem to emerge: the feminist consciousness in Arab societies indicated by numerous critical and fictional works challenges i) the religious and cultural status-quo as well as traditional patriarchy. Therefore one particular issue on which a kind of consensus seems to have arisen among most feminist thinkers is ii) a new unshaken belief in women's strength and source of power. Fatna Sabbah provides an ideal illustration of the female 'voracious crack' which helps to conceptualize the role and meaning of women's power as an essential paradigm of femininity, as projected by the collective psyche. The male reading of the history of gender relations by Bouhdiba suggests similar determinants. Other fragments and echoes of this kind of vaginocentrist critique of Arabo-Islamic writing are found in works.

There is consequently a need to underline the significance of the present assumption about pan-Arab feminist textuality. This is supported by other narrative manifestations of the vaginocentrism which marks cultural writing, for instance, through the repeated occurrence of the ogress or the *ghoula*. The general and universal representation of women as libidinous and so physically threatening represents, in this particular case, a way of disentangling the threads of the multifaceted and colourful ogress who is also a deadly creature for mankind.[4] Feminist writing cuts

4. Other female characters are often variants of *ghoulas*, even the beautiful and apparently innocuous Shahrazad who manages to seduce and 'disarm' the ferocious prince Shahrayar with her

across divine and humane messages to conjure up the unattractive picture of terrible femininity that it helps to codify into a paradigm of the feminine principle. The various feminist discursive treatments are erected into a systemic knowledge endowed with the power to re-present but also transcend a certain model of outward social reality so far defined and imposed by the pallocracies of the Arab world. Within this form of subversive criticism and re-assessment of reality, lies perhaps the most original and powerful voice of pan-Arab academic feminism, its resurrection of the Terrible Mother who is substituted to the more popular - and male determined - archetype of the Good Mother sought by the El-Ghazali and other theologians, past and present.

But the sexual paradigm is not treated in isolation but interferes in the political field as well. It appeared that discussions of women's conditional access to the public world was determined by ideological treatments of femininity and the values of domesticity and nurturing on one hand and the political, underlined by the dominance of patriarchal interests, on the other hand. Fatma Oussedik has demonstrated how sexual drives are managed by a patriarchal society through a critical reading of the official discourses which it elaborates. It may be argued that political analysis applied to

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bewitching charm and her knowledge. Since connections have been found to exist between notions of female charm, glamour and witchcraft (according to Karen Armstrong's study), the princess becomes endowed with harmful powers, lying in her sexuality and intelligence.

developmentalism constitutes an essential interpretive category as regards the position of women in the work of female social scientists. It has undergone a gradual radicalization, culminating in the articulation of a whole network of local, regional and world politics as they contribute to the subordination of women, not necessarily to their promotion. Although, the political debate maps the feminist discourse in a different but related way to the sexual/religious, its focus is more contemporary, less historically referential but not a-historical.

However, the culturalist perspective to which Social Evolutionary Theory was opposed has widened its conceptual ground. This is best illustrated by the fictional development of gender identities and images of women. It seems to lend support to the idea that the rise of the feminist novel, represented by Nawal El Saadawi and Assia Djebar opened up a new phase of feminist writing. Again this marks a fundamental contrast with feminist epistemology in the West where the study of images of women prevails.[5] Feminist theoretical work in North Africa and the Arab East, part of the broader scholarly activity of feminists in the South and other Middle Eastern thinkers (especially from Iran and Turkey), evolved from technical and sociological studies

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5. This is shown by the work of Toril Moi on Anglo-American women's fiction, Sexual/Textual Politics (London: Methuen, 1985).

on women and the family to embrace more gendered, theoretical readings.

According to Fatma Oussedik, 'these studies which seek to integrate women into a process of development, will not be meaningful if they are not accompanied by investigation into the prevailing ideology with regards to women and their sexuality'.[6] So, she urges her fellow female researchers to 'demystify the prevailing view on women and the Arab-Islamic tradition whose ultimate premise is to reject women as producers and to recognize them only as bodies (reproducers)'.[7] This is sometimes channelled through populist and nationalist discourses on the necessity of protecting the family, social cohesion, the security and unity of the nation and the material development of the country.

The importance of politics and analyses of the state in relation to gender, equality and democracy strengthens an important thesis: post-colonial pan-Arab feminisms articulate a brand of social and political critique. Given the political emphasis, rather leftist, within women's studies, members of the Arab Women's Association claim that they are primarily 'historical socialist feminists'. This label indicates the allegiance of North African, Middle Eastern women intellectuals and other academics from the diaspora, to particular ethics of struggle and their commitment to a politicized agenda

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6. Oussedik, 'To Conduct Research on Women', p. 6.

7. Oussedik, 'To Conduct Research on Women', p. 6.

which sets out to undermine class division and patriarchal domination as well as imperialism and exploitation of national resources. So, El Saadawi explains these feminist concerns of her fellow sisters from the women's movement:

> Historical because we have studied our history, and we know that feminism has been embedded in our history since the start of slavery and patriarchy and class. Since ancient times, women have opposed these evils very hard, throughout Africa and the Arab world. And we call ourselves socialist because we are against class, and feminist because we are against patriarchy.[8]

It may be argued in summation that from the early bourgeois and liberal feminism of the turn of the century, the embattled phase in the fifties and sixties when feminist struggle merged with pan-Arab nationalism, it moved, in the eighties to more academic, independent and militant forms, with a tendency to articulate issues through socialist perspectives. The liberal trend has persisted while the left-wing approach has gained in radicalism with the growing force of feminism in the Third World to operate as a substitute - or a vehicle - to political aims in the democratization process and development.

On the other hand, the methodological and conceptual framework of the movement of women has been developing from another viewpoint, that of working within Western modes of scholarship. First World intellectual tradition

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8. Marcel Farry 'With Nawal El Saadawi', Spare Rib, p. 23.

applied to indigenous research, in addition to 'traditional' projections of women, imposes contradictory values and distorted assumptions. Therefore, issues about the validation of feminism in the region, the legitimacy of feminists to operate as academics and militants in their own right as well as the authenticity of female identities as a whole are consistently raised. For a long time, Arab women, whether as subjects of study or authors, were objectified and victimized by foreign and indigenous research but today they are increasingly able to escape definitional patterns so far determined by out-dated concepts of tradition and modernity, whether emanating from local popular perceptions and research or from beyond this indigenous framework.

8. 3. Practical and Conceptual Impediments of Research

Research on women is often devalued and discredited. This, plus other pressures exerted by the political system, means that some women researchers whose work is marked by radical concerns about sex roles and patriarchy, resent being classified as feminists as they have not yet come to terms with the negative connotations of feminism in their societies. And because the price they often have to pay for daring to challenge can be a heavy one in professional, political and personal terms, Arab feminists may be considered the new witches of the twentieth century, especially in view of their har assment by religious forces.

One of the difficulties facing women writers is publication. Its importance in determining the access of females to authorship and in allowing them a voice prompted the organizers of the Arab Women's Association Conference to devote its annual meeting in 1991 to publication. But there is the problematic issue of censorship which hampers the course of disseminating ideas. It is practised often as part of state control over intellectual production and therefore allows only a narrow access to the critical work of scholars, whether foreign or local, especially in politically sensitive areas. Books by women fall in the category most censored or neglected altogether. Whether published at home or abroad, they tend to be more hastily discarded and texts labelled feminist generally fall under the undeclared label of subversive literature. This includes books purportedly adopting non-feminist lines. The difficulty of publishing for women does not solely concern the production of books but also reviews, reports, newsletters as well as their distribution nationally and regionally at least. This restriction, structural as well as political, hampers communication between women's groups and associations and the flow of information between them. As a result, recurring set-backs may be experienced by those who struggle actively and in various ways to improve the situation of women and who want to mobilize around legal and political matters. So there seems to be little opportunity for female emancipation to lobby for the improvement of policies affecting women's

lives and for their implementation without further sacrifices in coordinating the actions of women in countries of the south part of the Mediterranean. There have been considerable gains however as noted earlier but the improvement of publishing and the availability of books on markets and libraries,[9] alongside the introduction of Women Studies' departments to enhance academic concerns about feminism and the allocation of grants and funding for research and women's projects become crucial requirements in the struggle. Nevertheless, there are a growing number of publications by women inside and outside the Maghreb and the Middle East. For those who found audiences in the West after the publication of their work there, there is a concern that their books and articles are not always available in Arab libraries. The colonial and Orientalist tradition works 'positively' in the case of the female academic, towards establishing a new trend: that of reading Arab women who thus become, in publishing terms, 'sexy'. A certain amount of ambiguousness subtly operates within this 'sexiness' invalidating the sustained belief that women, in that part of the world, are semi-educated, illiterate or passive harem inmates. The new woman as writer and definer of her own fate in intellectual and personal terms, in other words as an ex-Oriental female, might then appear as an attractive novelty and owes much,

9. The price of books increased considerably in Arab countries in the aftermath of the Lebanese civil war as Beirut was an important centre of publication and research in the area (a fact noted by writers such as Fatima Mernissi).

in Western imagination, to the 'Westernization' of the Arab middle classes. This stereotyping, challenged by the woman as author, seems to offer new possibilities of viewing and experiencing womanhood.

Publishing in Western countries is also political in many terms, vis-a-vis Western or foreign scholars; it is largely controlled by what Dale Spender called 'the gatekeepers'[10] of the academic world through the process by which they provide support to prospective writers, select works to be published, review and promote them on the grounds of criteria which are not always motivated by the main consideration of academic excellence as some authors, who drew on their own experience with publishing, have demonstrated.[11]

Whether working at home or abroad, the solution for women researchers lies in forging networks of solidarity with women of the Third World as a whole with whom they have shared political and material interests and to establish contacts and exchange with feminists world-wide. Networking and systemic solidarity should work in favour of their own intellectual production.

The linguistic plurality of women's work is important because of the need to validate feminist knowledge in a systemic sense, as a disciplinary exercise in its own right aiming at theoretical indictments that try to explain the position of women. It is worth

10. Dale Spender, 'The Gatekeepers: a Feminist Critique of Academic Publishing' in Doing Feminist Research, ed. by Helen Roberts (London: Routledge, 1981), pp. 186-202.

11. Spender, 'the Gatekeepers'.

outlining the fact that Caroline Ramazonoglu who raises the problem of validating Western feminism as a social science in the eyes of its own critics and public mentions the problematical issue of experience: to what extent the feminist argument needs experience to become credible. The linguistic characteristic of women's critical and fictional production becomes intricate because of the need to validate the feminist argument through experience: it posits the question as to how far one can re-present an experience, for instance that of the daily hardship and subordination endured by poor peasant women in the Arab countryside by using a foreign medium? Similarly, from what position is the feminist researcher speaking about the experience of those 'other' women: how far can she be heard and to what extent are her own words able to shape a new reality and experience for these subjects of study? It is difficult to offer satisfactory answers to these questions mainly because of the limited access to schooling of large numbers of women. This means that they have no real access to the results of the research undertaken about them or of the writings dealing sometimes so intimately with their lives.

Bearing in mind the impediments and pressures faced by most female researchers, in addition to internal limitations and international misgivings, the validation of feminist struggle and the recognition of gender studies as a worthy scholarly investment in the countries

of the Maghreb and the Machrek become strong imperatives for the progress and success of feminism itself.

There are other problems considered internal to the critical process of feminist thought more relevant to the theoretical expertise of feminism as gradually developed by women. These, in addition to the overall conditions of feminism as discourse, are discussed in the final chapters.

CHAPTER NINE

PROBLEMS AND CONTRADICTIONS IN FEMINIST CRITICISM

9. 1. Cultural Authenticity, Writing and Identity

It is often noted by women scholars that they experience a split of identity into insider/outsider, which is reminiscent of the process of creative production experienced by fictional writers.[1] This issue has moral, social and political implications as it helps erase manifestations of difference and draw 'boundaries' of identity, whether at the sexual, class, ethnic or national levels. Deniz Kandiyoti replaces the predicament within a more global indigenous discourse on women:

> Discourses on women's authenticity are therefore at the heart of a utopian populism which attempts to obliterate such divisions by demarcating boundaries of the 'true' community and excluding the 'Other' within'.[2]

Although the present theoretical issue on authenticity and women is illustrated by the particular case of sociological research and fieldwork, its implications and

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1. See chapter five on Women's Literary Voices.

2. Kandiyoti, 'Introduction' in Women, Islam and the State, p. 8.

parameters largely apply to most research conducted by women, especially if they set out to question patriarchal forms of domination over women. Perhaps fieldwork ideally brings the issue into sharper focus by virtue of its peculiar positioning between writing and social reality or theory and practice, which requires from the female researcher constant efforts at adjustment and adaptation so that alienation of the scholar and her work from both her subjects of study and the milieu it claims to investigate is averted.

The following examples, as described mainly in a book, Arab Women in the Field[3] reflect the disheartening discrepancies and ambiguities informing the process of research by women on women in the Middle East. Some of these tensions and difficulties are shared by female researchers even in Western societies as Helen Roberts describes in Doing Feminist Research.[4] However, it appears that the cultural/political context in which feminist research takes place in Arab countries dictates specific conditions of development for the female investigator and her work. The issue of cultural authenticity, seen in the light of previous statements about the development of feminist thought in relation to the historical past of the region and as an imperative in the social control of women, becomes one such parameter

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3. Soraya Altorki (ed.), Arab Women in the Field: Studying your Own Society (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1988).

4. Helen Roberts (ed.), Feminist Research.

to account for in any such debate and one which informs the specificity of the writing in many ways.

Nevertheless, there seems to be an ability to re-process and re-enact positively the problems born of negative conditions of living and researching, which gave these women resilience in confronting an increasingly aggressive and assertive but also a more politically complex religious orthodoxy which also uses this 'aspect of populist ideology'[5] as part of its own enforcement of moral and religious conformity.

Some female social scientists, while researching their respective societies, deal with intricate situational problems which ultimately shape their work in specific ways. One predominant contradiction resides in their ambiguous status of insiders/outsiders with which they had to come to terms in satisfactory ways for their own sake and that of the people whose lifestyles they were engaged in studying. They are particularly careful not to alienate themselves from the mainstream of society which grants them a certain mobility, flexibility and trust to allow their work to be possible at all.

Furthermore, those writers who display more definite feminist ideas generally feel a sense of being culturally displaced. This feeling is heightened in the case of the writers mentioned below and who were trained abroad, consequently finding themselves compromising between the values of two different worlds while trying to adapt to

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5. Kandiyoti, 'Introduction', p. 8.

each social/cultural setting without jeopardizing a sense of integrity. Much of their energy is thus invested in the struggle to remain in their social world while keeping a sufficient distance from it in order to be able to assess cultural patterns and explore other paradigms. So they remain alternatively insiders and outsiders within their indigenous and foreign social milieus where they happen to be living and working. Soraya Altorki, a Saudi Arabian educated at Berkeley, speaks about the socialization she experienced conducting fieldwork for her doctoral anthropological thesis on the organization of the Saudi family and the political influence of elite social groups in her home-town Jiddah. She faced problems that she then turned into assets benefiting her fieldwork:

> These included the requirement of abiding by norms expected of me as a native; overcoming the reluctance of informants to provide me with direct answers to my questions concerning religious practices, intra-family conflicts, and the like; and resocializing myself into my own culture, from which I had been separated for a number of years due to residence and education abroad.[6]

The inner sense of disruptiveness is partly due to the biculturality, running as an underlying current in many feminist narratives, whether critical or fictional. The female author experiences, in addition to set-backs and the disheartening conflicts attached to the status of

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6. Altorki (ed.), 'At Home in the Field' in Women in the Field, p. 49.

women researchers, endowed with ambiguous roles and status - an untrustworthy one in the eyes of many people. But Altorki still believes that the move is worthwhile by asserting that 'the female indigenous anthropologist studying her own society can play a major role in providing a more balanced analysis of the role of women in Arab politics and society'.[7]

The frustrations due to bureaucratic, political, cultural, religious, or simply chauvinistic motives are not seen as restrictions but can become integrated and appropriated as the boundaries of research are stretched through new definitional dimensions. Altorki's case is worth mentioning because it articulates highly restrictive and contradictory conditioning factors which are, elsewhere too (although to a lesser degree), hampering the flow of feminist research. Sometimes the pressures are so acute as to prevent the formulation of the research altogether. She recalls:

> My status did not afford me immunity from observing all the taboos and attending to all the obligations my culture prescribed for me - an immunity usually granted to foreign anthropologists... Had I not conformed, I would have risked ostracism and termination of my research.[8]

And she adds, 'in that sense, my resocialization generated data on an experiential level different from

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7. Altorki (ed.), 'At Home in the Field', p. 49.

8. Altorki (ed.), 'At Home in the Field', p. 57.

that to which an outsider could bear witness'.[9] Interestingly, her position as an Arab-Muslim woman researching within a sex-segregated society had implications for the methodological and topical aspects of her work, a phenomenon which is similarly shared, with varying intensity, by a number of female scholars in other parts of the Islamic world. Altorki's initial doctoral project, concerned the religious structures of Egyptian peasantry but she soon gave up the idea of working in Egypt because of the authorities' refusal to grant her a permit to embark on the research. Her new project, though concerning her own country and the upper middle class to which she belongs, suffered from other constraints, usually associated with gender roles and cultural or religious taboos observed by Saudian families. In similar cases, the female investigator may try to integrate these aspects of her work into a conceptual frame where they become theorised and structurally constituent of the methodology itself, rather than just a hindrance. It may be argued that these special conditions have a direct effect: the various structures, orientations and prescriptions are being dictated by both object and subject of research. In this sense, the conditions of writing might contrast with those of a Western tradition of research as it articulates an essential assumption about the existence of a textual authority and the omniscient presence of an

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9. Altorki (ed.), 'At Home in the Field', p. 56.

ascendent and independent authorial voice. It is less evident in the case of these 'Women in the Field': authorial power determines the conditions of their research, requiring them to behave as 'dutiful daughters'.[10] In a comment bearing witness to the latter, the author states:

> My status affected my research in another way. Restricted possibilities for movement outside the house and pervasive segregation of men and women in public confined the research predominantly to the world of women. These realities affected the choice of topic for investigation. I could not study market or political relations, for example. Neither could I investigate any other subject within which men, rather than women, are the dominant actors.[11]

This male imprint could be decentered or invalidated through changes in the conditions of writing prevailing in intellectual spheres where the professional and the academic are rarely separated from the political. It is justified by the need for women to abide by cultural and moral norms. The role of the international conjuncture also explains the rigidity of such influences as they condition the actual textual production. However this overall presentation is not as determining as it might appear since the feminist critic is unnerved by the issue of cultural obedience and manages, by virtue of her inherently transgressive stance, to transcend the

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10. This expression is borrowed from the title of lila Abu Lughod's article, 'Fieldwork of a Dutiful Daughter' in Women in the Field, ed. by Altorki, pp. 139-162.

11. Altorki (ed.), 'At Home in the Field', p. 56.

boundaries drawn by the male tradition[12] and dictated by the imposition of notions of cultural conformity and obedience.

Another situational aspect of research is experienced by the Palestinian/Lebanese Suad Joseph who, born and raised in the United States, went to the Middle East to conduct fieldwork there on the politicisation of religious sects in the Lebanon. She also behaved in the way expected of her by new friends, neighbours and her newly found relatives. This led to the personalisation of her research by virtue of her discovery of new roots within Lebanese society which also enriched her life emotionally and intellectually. She was, however, careful not to allow the overwhelming presence of her friends as well as the restrictions imposed on her by a set of social rules and the demands of what she failed to identify as cultural authenticity, to work to her detriment or to exhaust her energy. She says that because of the different behaviour she adopted in order to satisfy various groups of people (and the cultural norms of female behaviour), she felt torn between conflicting demands due to what she terms her 'bicultural socialization'.[13] However, she immersed herself in a network of friends and relatives, aware of the dualism of

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12. At least to a certain extent; in the rest of this thesis, there is a brief review of some problematic areas which affect women's criticism, altering its feminist positions.

13. Suad Joseph, 'Feminization, Familism, Self, and Politics: Research as a Mughtaribi' in Women in the Field, ed. by Altorki, p. 25.

her persona. She remained, in her own words, 'the suspected outsider'.[14] This suspicion is due to the fact that she could not, by virtue of her dual identity as outsider/insider, and her double allegiance to East and West, totally reflect or endorse the norms of cultural authenticity as understood by the Lebanese setting within which she was living and researching. Other implicit aspects of the problematic of authenticity in relation to writing, femininity and identity are explored in the discussion of the analytical centrality of Islam in feminist narratives.

9. 2. The Ambivalence of Developmentalism/Culturalism

Several feminist writers from the area have pointed out that women's scholarly work is marked by a dualistic tendency from a methodological viewpoint: it tends to adopt either a developmentalist or a culturalist framework, the former concerned principally with Social Evolutionary Theory and the latter mainly with investigations into the role of Islam and culture in the (dis)empowerment of women and the shaping of their identity. This methodological pattern may be determined by the concern of social scientists for 'the lag between a traditionalist Islamic ideology and the demands of full development',[15] at least in the early phase of gender

14. Joseph, 'Research as a Mughtaribi', p. 27.

15. Amal Rassam 'Arab Women: the Status of Research in the Social Sciences and the Status of Women' in Unesco Report, p. 2.

studies. I decided to insert the discussion of the Culturalist approach (and its significance in feminist scholarship) within the forthcoming debate on the centrality of Islam in analytical treatments of women.

Research on women and the family, in its early stage, was characterized by the dominance of particular themes such as law, family planning, social organization, emigration and prostitution, in other words by a rather technical approach to development. The main preoccupation of this approach is the role and visibility of women in questions such as employment, jurisdiction, family planning and so forth. How the developmentalist endeavour structured the experience of gender for women and their reality was not, at least not yet, an overriding concern. The use of theories of development was deemed necessary mainly because of the intricate negative forces subjugating women, due mainly, according to the material stand-point of developmentalism, to the lack of economic progress, social welfare and housing. It is thus associated with the socio-material structures and histories of the countries in the region, where there seems to be, especially in North Africa, Syria and Egypt, an endemic struggle for material welfare and socio-economic justice. In this case, the developmentalist debate seemed justified, contained and contrived by the particular political, social, historical and material conditions of each country. This in turn led to a prioritization of goals of research in the area according to those economic and educational needs and legal

requirements. As for the adoption of dependency theory, it is largely motivated by concerns over the influence of the world capitalist market on local economic endeavours and populations, concomitant to the transfer of technical expertise and machinery from the technological West to the countries of the South.

So, the rationale behind the frequent use of and reference to theories of development in the works produced by female social scientists was - and still is - that female subordination is contingent on material and legal matters with the added preoccupation in such writing about the socio-economic differences existing between women of different classes and regions, their varying access to resources, their individual abilities to negotiate their positions with patriarchy and to alleviate the harshness of their burden, especially that of the poor urbanite and the rural female. The latter often has to assume the many burdens of household duties and farm work. It may therefore be argued that Social Evolutionary Theory yields a fundamental assumption in discussions about the subordination of women and their disempowerment through impoverishment and loss of productive roles: mainly that socio-economic advancement is a significant factor which allows their emancipation and progress. It was assumed throughout the development of most of this literature, that it would liberate women from at least some housework chores, the burden of reproduction, raising and caring for children, more so in the work of left-wing thinkers for whom inequalities,

whether gender based or social, should be automatically eradicated by the advent of socialist egalitarianism. However this argument seemed to be thwarted from the outset because of a number of factors that scholars failed to address during this early phase of developmentalist research. Although some thinkers pointed out deficiencies inherent in this primary stage of Social Evolutionary Theory, it is a more recent criticism of development and gender by feminist intellectuals which highlighted more fully the problematical aspects of this question.

Female scholars contributing to an important Unesco Report dealing with an assessment of the state of research on women in the Arab world seemed to agree on the limited and somehow parochial perspectives revealed by the available methodological lines. Moreover, the study of gender within the developmentalist framework, presented, in spite of its apparent instrumentality, some analytical limitations as the approach tended to be, by and large, descriptive and insufficiently theorised. This absence of theoretical import derives however from a major stumbling block constituted in these studies by their inability to articulate the problematic of 'the women question' within an ideological and structuralist framework and, more importantly, from a gender perspective. However, development studies soon evolved towards an understanding of the role of ideology in inducing and perpetuating the state of oppression in the case of women throughout the Arab region, as attested to

by Alya Baffoun who remarks that 'among the priorities for future research is the role of superstructure and ideology in perpetuating the innatist image of women, conducive to their subordinate status and the various forms of violence against women in North Africa'.[16]

There seems to be a broad consensus among feminist theorists who assessed the general state of research on women about the need to transcend methodological limitations and to diversify and radicalize the theoretical issues raised by gender and development. It seems, in this respect, that pan-Arab feminist thought needs to integrate various contributions such as analyses of the historical development of gender relations, which incidentally include a history of Islam and the contradictions it spawns in women's lives, especially from a legislative point of view.

Additional critical moves seemed to have been reinforced by a new reflection on the role of material factors in shaping specific discourses on womanhood, the family and strategies of development. Issues become conceptualized, so there was no mere mention of the role of 'political leaders'[17] in this subsequent phase of feminist thinking but rather of ideological apparatuses such as the state, governmentality, patriarchy, capitalism, communal networks and so forth and of their

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16. Alya Baffoun, 'Research in the Social Sciences on North African Women: Problems, Trends and Needs' in Unesco Report, p. 55.

17. Rassam, 'Arab Women: the Status of Research' in Unesco Report, p. 7.

interaction through the social and legal field as well as through the modernization projects of the state.

The limitation of this approach was further undermined by Algerian female academics who established groups of research on women and labour, after realizing the ideological and theoretical void informing the work on women in North Africa and the rest of the region. It is notably Fatma Oussedik who argues that 'the initiation of reflection on the position of women in the Arab countries amounts to attempting to launch new dynamics at both the economic and the ideological levels'.[18] This criticism advocates the need to rethink the hegemonic role of the ruling elite which, through a 'mystification process',[19] imposes on the rest of society a certain view of the world that helps to preserve its interests. This view will manipulate for instance sexuality 'as a strategic area' in constructing a particular social reality. Starting from the premiss that there is an 'integrationist discourse'[20] between all Arab countries which failed to materialize at the economic level but operated with efficiency at the level of ideology, Oussedik argues that 'one of the places (..) in which this ideological unity is founded is that of the discourse on women'[21] and goes on to say:

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18. Oussedik, 'To Conduct Research on Women', p. 115.

19. The political notion of 'mystification' was introduced by Oussedik to speak about the populist ideology spread by the ruling elite and the middle classes to preserve the status-quo.

20. Oussedik, 'To Conduct Research on Women, p. 114

21. Oussedik, 'To Conduct Research on Women', p. 114.

> The elements which serve to perpetuate the oppression of women thus appear to be contained, on the one hand, in the arguments used to express the unity of the Arab world, which amount to an ideological area and, on the other hand, on specific economic practices which do not allow women to appear as economic agents or as citizens.[22]

In view of the ideological dimension bestowed on discourses on women and the family, whether cultural or official/populist, Oussedik helps to highlight an important problematic: the ability of developmentalist theory to conceal the patriarchal nature of its premiss and the manipulative stance its tends to adopt towards the issue of women's rights. She exemplifies her argument with two cases, namely employment and family planning. According to her study, female employment is conditioned by the link instituted by official discourse between their economic mobilization for utilitarian purposes and their traditional roles, those of wives and mothers, in other words as producers and reproducers. The implication of these antithetical conceptions of women's roles becomes therefore easy to predict from the viewpoint of the so-called integrationist discourse:

> It is clear therefore that working women appear useful only as a reserve force which may be manipulated according to the economic needs of the country, the justification of this being the position held by women in the family as the guardians of values and traditions.[23]

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22. Oussedik, 'To Conduct Research on Women', p. 114.

23. Oussedik, 'To Conduct Research on Women, p. 119.

She looks at the issue of fertility patterns and family planning and concludes that tradition exhorts North African women to take refuge in their reproductive function as the only source of respect and value while Gulfian women who enjoy a better standard of living are encouraged to have more children. At the same time, some development experts blame the demographic explosion for destroying strategies of development. Considering the importance given to the role of maternity in North Africa, it is relevant to assert that 'in the circumstances, the policies with direct repercussions as regards their bodies lead women to be even further dispossessed'.[24]

Algerian feminist social scientists from the GRFA[25] widened the discussion. More specifically, they speak of the 'problems involved in participation'[26] for women, pointing to the alienating nature of these allegedly active roles in the public realm when they are not articulated by a radical gendered vision. The essential predicament of this methodological approach lies, according to them, in the 'establishment-centered' angle it adopts which incidentally works at 'manufacturing consent'[27] since it requires accordance of the aims and

24. Oussedik, 'To Conduct Research on Women', p. 120.

25. The GRFA is a research group established at the University of Oran: 'Groupe de Recherche sur la Femme Algérienne'.

26. Oussedik, 'To Conduct Research on Women', p. 82.

27. An expression from Noam Chomsky and the title of one of his latest books.

findings of research with the ideological interests of the state. This is sometimes echoed by both nationalist and women's groups. Even Deniz Kandiyoti speaks of the presentation of women in modernist discourse as 'a wasted national resource'.[28] It ensues that the active participation of women in development is not sought for the sake of women's aspirations for self-fulfilment and as an expression of their liberation movement but 'as a condition of something else', the development of the country and the progress of society, in other words, 'development is the goal',[29] not woman. On these counts, participation is conceived in purely liberal, humanistic and even nationalist terms, only as an attainment of more social justice for all individuals concerned and as a condition for national cohesion and prosperity but not as a condition and opportunity for restructuring society and the relations between the sexes on more fundamental grounds. Oussedik rightly argues that 'in their work of demystification, Arab women come up against sweeping statements in which reference is made to the national economy and to matters identified as such'.[30] While they disputed the gender blindness informing such an argument and its deep-seated reactionary implication vis-a-vis women, Fatiha Hakiki and Claude Talahite usefully employ

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28. Kandiyoti, 'Introduction', p. 10.

29. Fatiha Hakiki and Claude Talahite 'Human Sciences Research on Algerian Women' in Unesco Report, ed. by Rassam, p. 86.

30. Oussedik, 'To Conduct Research on Women', p. 116.

it in their critical assessment of female academic treatments: its treatment helped to indicate changes in women's writing in North Africa and its evolution towards feminist modes of expression.

It appears from the recent literature on Social Evolutionary Theory that it has managed to resolve some of the discrepancies and therefore attain a more radical criticism of women's subordinate role in society. Henceforth, development is no longer viewed as a homogeneous concept while gendered analyses are adopted in decentering the pervasive force of domestic ideology as it operates through modernization projects, aid programmes and educational schemes. So females are increasingly conceived in dynamic terms and defined primarily as women in their own right who are constantly and in various ways negotiating their position with their respective - male determined - environments and with the patriarches.

Finally, there is another concern surfacing from insights into socio-economic development and modernization, namely its (implied) juxtaposition with a Culturalist approach which, in a similar fashion to developmentalism has evolved considerably over time. Broadly speaking, the debate on Culture is traditionally associated with Islam, theocracy and spirituality with all the implications and associations this line of representation draws to itself by virtue of its own framing by Western Orientalism and an anthropological tradition. These are also the essential characteristics

of the methodologies identified with Culturalism as will be established in due course.

But it is noteworthy that an overriding assumption conceives of these two approaches in terms of a dichotomy which sees traditionalism as embedded in the Cultural framework and modernism as located only within Social Evolutionary Theory. Again, the biases inherent in such perspectives soon become apparent. Its most direct implication is the affinity it sets between modernization and Westernization with the effect that the traditionalist grounds of the Culturalist approach are linked to religion, namely Islam, which, in turn, foregrounds the traditionalist and neo-Orientalist values attached to concepts of women within Islamic countries. The terms of the Cultural debate have presently shifted to new spheres of knowledge, due to the re-assessment of dominant male discourses by feminist analysis. And the importance of studying images of women is now invoked as part of the deconstruction of authoritarian patriarchy. However, because it stresses the role of Islam as a cultural referent, the culturally oriented debate raises further questions, notably the fact that the use of religion as a signifier for the subordinate state of women in Arab societies poses problems for critical methodology, a paradox discussed below. The need to study the formative power of literary history in addressing female subordination and feminist strategy becomes crucial and might help shed the remnants of antiquated considerations.

9. 3. The Analytical Centrality of Islam

The long standing debate on Islam and women provided, for at least the last two centuries, a major methodological avenue for Western and Eastern scholars. The Algerian academic Marnia Lazreg has presented the most sustained critique against the religious prevalence in treatments of womanhood when it comes to women living in Islamic countries. Her main argument is that 'scholarship on North African and Middle Eastern societies typically focuses on Islam as a privileged subject of inquiry whether it is dealt with as religion or as a culture'.[31] However it is its exploitation by indigenous feminist scholars or from the diaspora which raises particular concern. Discussions on the centrality of Islam in relation to the 'women question' cannot be dissociated from the wider issues of Western tradition on the subject of the Arab or Muslim woman. The significance of that Western framework will be appreciated in discussing the implications of Islam and women for all involved, from First and Third Worlds and for a broader analysis of neo-colonial discourse.

The literature on women in North Africa and the rest of the Arab region focuses on the Islamic referent in relation to state, institutions, order and gender roles and, more notably, as the quasi-unique analytical structure within examinations of the problematic of those women identified as Muslim. It occupies a predominant

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31. Lazreg, 'Feminism and Difference', p. 83.

position in any debate, scholarly or otherwise, local or foreign, on the situation of women living in what is first projected as a universal Islamic social and cultural system. But it may be argued that the centrality of religion in debates on women manifests itself fundamentally in the analytical framework it provides. It is surely a matter of concern for many feminist militants whose struggle for women's rights in their societies has entailed an alliance with democratic and secular groupings to be categorized as 'Muslim feminists' in the critical literature about them. This enduring link between femininity and religiosity is equally expressed in the term 'Muslim feminists' indiscriminately bestowed on 'all' feminists living in Islamic theocracies, regardless of the secular organization of some women's groups and their efforts at dissociating themselves from the orthodox discourse, which is first a religious one.[32] For instance, Kandiyoti assesses the available trends in feminist work according to the relationship these critics and their writings entertain with Islam and the position they adopt towards the latter. She thus distinguishes between 'fundamentalist apologists', 'Muslim feminists' and 'radicals', all in reference to the central category of Islam and consequent readings of the Quran, respectively

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32. See a recent occurrence of this labelling in a review of Women, Islam and the State (ed. by Kandiyoti) made by Nira Yuval-Davis in Feminist Review, no. 42 (Autumn 1992) (pp. 103-105) where the author, following a well established tradition, refers to feminists from Arab/Muslim countries as 'Muslim feminists'.

as conservative, progressive and 'seditious' (since the so-called radical position claims that Islam does not favour women's rights).[33] This also translates into an encroachment on identities of other women and a unilateral endeavour at enforcing definitional frameworks on them.

The traditional value bestowed on women by the consistent use of Islam may be expressed through use of icons such as the harem, purdah or veiling as Lazreg has shown. Notions of veiling have become a parameter of colonial and Orientalist writing, attached to the identity of women, seen as exclusively religious and 'traditional', in other words as ahistorical. Lazreg illustrates the reductionist and rigidly stereotypical nature of discussions on women in relation to Islam, highlighting the universal metaphorical value bestowed on it at by various historical junctures. The adoption by the Arab Women's Association of the motto: 'unveiling the mind', demonstrates Lazreg's attack on indigenous female academics for falling into the trap, namely the fascination exerted on Western audiences by the issue of the veil, which contributes to the reinforcing of their identification with Tradition, ahistoricity and victimization.[34] Another case which underlines a lack of

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33. Kandiyoti, 'Introduction', p. 1.

34. A typical example is a recent work on the situation of women in some Arab countries by a Moroccan researcher, Hinde Taarji, Les voilées de l'Islam (Paris: Balland, 1990). This usefully attests to the case made here about the obsessive reference by indigenous female scientists, whether feminists or not, to women, veiling and Islam. In addition, the sensationalist value of such titles for a Western audience is unmistakably

sufficient self-consciousness over the matter is provided by Mernissi who seems to revoke the Western reading of the veil as symbol of Arab female debasement and seclusion by noting the following paradox: the French anthropologist Germaine Tillion expresses wonder about peasant women in Algeria who take up the practice of veiling once they move to a city, failing to see that 'for the rural woman who has recently emigrated to the town, the veil is a sign of upward mobility - the expression of her newly acquired status as "urbanite"'.

Before embarking on an examination of the deeper implications and meanings of the link between Islam and women in indigenous and Western narratives, whether in the social sciences, the Humanities or popular media, let us first review some of the factors which could partly explain the persistence of the present predicament and why it is judged controversial. But first, these discussions of women in relation to Islam are reductive from the viewpoint of the approach they tend to adopt: to swing perpetually between two main positions, looking at Islam as either a misogynist or an egalitarian religion. In other words, it addresses the question as to whether Islam is an oppressive or liberal religion for women (the argument about Kandiyoti's classification of the positions towards women and Islam mentioned earlier is a good case in point).[35] In the light of arguments

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part of the Orientalist flavour bestowed in this way on these narratives.

35. This topic was covered in the first section of chapter seven.

presented in chapter six, the prevalence of religion becomes justified. Notably, it is the ideological import invested by local regimes and the ruling classes which determine the terms regarding women and the family which invoke as a leitmotive, the need to respect the Arab-Islamic heritage and so-called Islamic values. The discourse, again, may be identified as populist or nationalist, raising the need for cultural conformity. In addition, it is increasingly evident that religious belief, mingled with political struggles led, notably in the Maghreb, to havoc and the emergence of right wing movements which harnessed wide popular dissent and channelled it towards the mosques. The nature of the counter-revolution currently unfolding through religious activism and terrorism as is the case with several countries in the region, mainly Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria and Sudan and its impact on women justifies the use of religion in recent studies on women, although the issue of political and social malaise is not to be simply reduced to a matter of religious revival or the return of tradition. These events which culminated in the spread of religious fundamentalist ideology and activism cannot be divorced from issues affecting women and relations between the sexes. So religion still determines the political agenda in most parts of North Africa and the Middle East.

Therefore, it may be argued that the consistent use of religion in studies on women and the family can be accounted for, to a certain extent, by the nature of the

ongoing battles taking place in some parts of the Islamic world around religious and cultural identity, the form of government the masses are striving to achieve and, ultimately the strong opposition women find in a powerful Islamic fundamentalist movement. It is equally evident that the balance of power seems to perpetually shift between the conflicting forces firstly of a traditionalism seeking a solution to the disruption of society under both colonialism and post-colonialism via a return to Islam interpreted most surely along the lines of female seclusion and of a modernism, more socialist and liberal, apparently more drawn to Western values.

However, the use of religion in studies of women poses serious problems, not least because it is largely unquestioned by those writers who resort uncritically to its use. It is time to question the ideological bias and theoretical limitations informing its premiss from a feminist viewpoint, as established by Marnia Lazreg hitherto. The stress on an analytical approach to the sacred structure, including Islamic jurisprudence, the institutions it instigates and the cultural system it creates which characterize a great deal of indigenous feminist work, raises concerns about its discursive efficiency and its wider implications. This calls into question the future of feminist research in the region. It is evident at least that the widespread nature of this basic predicament might seriously narrow the development of new, more radical analytical approaches and hamper the rise of alternative lines of enquiry. The dominance of

the 'religious paradigm'[36] restricts the methodological lines, thematic devices and theoretical statements of the research and relegates women to the ghetto of religion.

It may be safe to assume that, to date, from the positions adopted by feminists so far and the limitations imposed by the arguments put forward, there has been no movement recorded beyond the notion of whether Islam is good or bad for women. And this is perhaps the most perplexing issue for pan-Arab feminism. As a result, one essential question raised by the location of gender within the religious is how does feminist work develop a discourse that goes beyond this kind of sterile opposition and consequent polarization.

Let us consider the implications of this attitude in a local and international context. There is an endeavour to locate it within prevailing gender ideologies. I do not wish to repeat here the analysis of Lazreg; however I shall use some of the evidence she produced in the process of examining what she terms the 'religious paradigm'.[37] According to her, this is endowed with 'a privileged explanatory power'[38] whether it is employed in area studies or feminist criticism. She examines it from, firstly, the viewpoint of Western intellectual discourse and then, subsequently, from the perspective of indigenous women writers.

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36. Lazreg, 'Feminism and Difference', p. 83.

37. Lazreg, 'Feminism and Difference', p. 83.

38. Lazreg, 'Feminism and Difference', p. 83

Relocated within the broader context of the social sciences and their development as part of a Western scholarly tradition, the predominance of the religious in the 'women question' appears as inherently biased, based on misconceptions and problematical assumptions. This is due to the fact that some of the reductive and negative views held by Western scholars about Islam are (consciously or unconsciously) reproduced, principally the image of Islam as 'self contained and flawed belief system impervious to change'.[39] More specifically, the position of social science in the West towards Islam and matters related to it is a disapproving and hostile one and the negativism born of these misapprehensions reverberates throughout the analytical structures of thought and representation. Lazreg articulates the problem as follows:

> Such science has managed to keep the study of North Africa and the Middle East in a sort of intellectual ghetto where theoretical and methodological developments that take place in the mainstream of social science are somehow deemed inapplicable.[40]

And the concomitant result is that 'like tradition, religion must be abandoned if Middle Eastern women are to be like Western women',[41] who are projected as offering ideal models of womanhood to the rest of the world. For

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39. Lazreg, 'Feminism and Difference', p. 84.

40. Lazreg, 'Feminism and Difference', p. 84.

41. Lazreg, 'Feminism and Difference', p. 85.

Lazreg, the Western female becomes the 'model deemed perfect' that 'other' women should strive to achieve. Her view, like Said's, is that Euro-American prejudice against Islam derives from antagonistic feelings against this particular religion and not necessarily from a concern about the anti-rationalism characterizing all belief systems. To prove this point, she provides a comparative view of religion in the eyes of the West, from the perspective of feminists:

> Although U.S feminists have attempted to accommodate Christianity and feminism and Judaism and feminism, Islam is inevitably presented as antifeminist.[42]

This is an important point according to Lazreg, the fundamentals of Western attitudes towards Islam, fascination and hostility, have been reproduced by women's criticism because, subsumed within this writing, are views about religion as 'the cause of gender inequality'.[43] She also argues that, although the religious theme is controversial, being a structure of interpretation favoured by colonial writers and anthropologists, women theorists from the area have adopted it unquestioningly.

Although such criticism assesses the main problematical aspects of pan-Arab feminist writing on a fairly broad basis, the argument about the reduction of

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42. Lazreg, 'Feminism and Difference', p. 10.

43. Lazreg, 'Feminism and Difference', p. 85.

Islam as she says to 'one or two *sura*, or injunctions, such as those related to gender hierarchy and the punishment meted out to adulterous women'[44] seems to be unjustified. Lazreg's criticism reduces in turn indigenous feminist scholarship and the academic activity of women to a mere descriptive and parochial exercise. On the other hand, the particular concern raised about the problematical preeminence of religion remains justified to a certain extent, whether Islam is examined as a belief system, a cultural practice or deconstructed as an ideological process. After all, the statements contained in the Quran about women contribute in concrete terms to the shaping of the daily lives of women subjected to the rules of Islamic governments which promulgate sexist family codes.

It thus appears that Lazreg's analysis predicates a close bond between two main issues, that of Islam as a crucial framework in studies of women and that of cultural imperialism. She inserts both questions within a more global perspective, that of the power differential between the Christian West and the Muslim East, also classified by Samir Amin as Centre and Periphery. The power differential, expressed by major conflicts such as the Gulf war and the bloody confrontation between Muslim Bosnians and Christian Serbs in former Yougoslavia, exacerbate for Muslims world-wide the sense of being singled out for aggressive discrimination in the name of

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44. Lazreg, 'Feminism and Difference', p. 86.

their religion and the victimization lead them to assert more forcefully - and more vociferously in the case of the militant ones - the religious component of their history. Rana Kabbani renders this process poignantly when she argues that 'reading the Muslim map has become unbearably painful, and makes us clutch our Qurans ever more tightly, if only in desperation'.[45]

Once the centrality of religion and the way it relates to Western domination is established, it becomes difficult to see or conceptualize its 'positive' role within post-modern writing produced by Arab women themselves. It remains however the locus of a valid criticism in discourses which are keen to show how culture relates to neo-colonialism. In this particular instance, the case of the veil and its 'fetishisation' world-wide exemplifies the contentious link between religion, women, imperialism and academic pursuit. The English translation of Mernissi's book, Le Harem politique, le prophète et les femmes[46] as simply Women and Islam attests, if need be, to the Western academic fascination with Islam in relation to 'Eastern' women and the re-establishment of ties with an obsolete

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45. Kabbani, 'Why Muslims fear the Future', The Guardian, p. 17.

46. Fatima Mernissi, Le Harem politique, le prophète et les femmes (Paris: Albin Michel, 1987). This issue is thus related to the problem of publishing discussed in an earlier chapter: a link was made between an Orientalist legacy in portraying 'Oriental' women. The Islamic referent is part of the process of 'Orientalizing' women. Hence the pernicious value of the translation which contributes at replacing Mernissi's work, mainly through the title, in an imperial tradition of Orientalism.

anthropological methodology fraught with dubious assumptions inherent in its overall approach.

However, within an indigenous context, Lazreg fails to consider the treatments of womanhood, within both popular and academic sources, and the role of patriarchy in shaping the terms of debates, cultural or otherwise, on women's status. Although she argues that there is a continuity between the writings on women produced by Arab and foreign female scholars, mainly in the reproduction, by the former, of problematical assumptions and controversial approaches, one cannot apprehend fully the issue of women and Islam without giving due attention to a twofold phenomenon: i) the role of this indigenous authoritarian management of the 'women question' which is equally 'imperialist' and indeed phallocentric and ii) the unicity and similarity between discourses drawn up by both Centre and Periphery regarding images of 'Arab women'. It is significant that they both essentialize women as spiritual/religious as well as inarticulate from the viewpoint of historical change. As a consequence, this conceptual treatment of the feminine does not emanate solely from the First World academy but as Oussedik argues, from the indigenous establishment. Blaming only the ex-colonial powers would amount, by a paradoxical twist of interpretation, to absolving the excesses and injustices of the compradore agents and elites who often resort to anti-imperialist and nationalist rhetoric and slogans, and divert attention away from the mismanagement of the local economies and

resources. This might explain further the persistence of religion as an analytical framework provided by the urban elites as they propagate ideologies of cultural authenticity, of national identity and social harmony at the expense of women who are called upon, yet again, to uphold these values and safeguard the family. This concern covers up for stagnation in thought and production and the absence of long-awaited socio-economic changes and democratic reforms throughout the region. According to Fatma Oussedik, the middle classes help to sustain these official patriarchal discourses which constantly refer to the cultural values of the Islamic past in order to legitimate their own undemocratic hold on power, their material and educational ascendency and the general status quo about the subordinate position of women. She raises the problem of women's position from a Marxist approach, as part of what she identifies as the integrationist discourses elaborated by the Arab middle classes and highlights the political manipulation of religion to justify and mask, or, in her own words, 'mystify' the lacunas and the division of society in classes.[47] Another Algerian feminist academic, Fadéla M'Rabet, had already premissed the link between the designs of the elites and traditional values and myths for strategic reasons. In Algerian Women published in the immediate post-war period, she argues that 'in Algeria, as other areas of the world, the bourgeois are

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47. Oussedik, 'To Conduct Research on Women', p. 115.

trying to revive the old myths only to delay the day of change'.[48]

In other words, there is a need to examine the particular designs drawn up by religious fundamentalist groups and their collusion, voluntary or self-conscious, with other undemocratic and conservative forces (located within the spheres of military and political power) in their overall attempts at forging - or re-inventing - specific models of citizenship marked by one's duty to Allah.[49] This requires (as argued throughout the thesis), a nurturing of Islamic identity in a kind of socio-political ethos about women and the family as sanctuaries of identity. It is important to bear in mind these parameters in discussions of pan-Arab feminist work which are, notwithstanding the hegemonic role of the West in representing and defining 'others', projected by a preeminent indigenous discursive activity. The indigenization of cultural imperialism, mediated by local processes, imposes on women functions of a concrete order, as mothers and wives, and of a symbolic order, as custodians of the so-called Arabo-Islamic values; in other words, they are reproducers of patriarchy and of its discourse. Fatma Oussedik criticizes the way women

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48. This is a translated extract from a chapter in the book of the Algerian feminist Fadéla M'rabet, 'tartuferies' in Les Algériennes (Paris: Maspéro, 1969). The translation appeared in Middle Eastern Women Speak, ed. by Warnock Elizabeth Fernea, p. 346.

49. See Chapter Seven where Mernissi's concept of obedience in relation to the identity of women as believers is explained further.

are called upon to uphold the religious identity of the group or the community through such an indigenous discursive treatment of femininity. So, she argues that 'in this discourse, women are of such slight economic and political account in the Arab countries that they can only be concerned with religious ideology and morals'.[50]

This strategy of Othering women can thus analogized to the Orientalizing process of the 'Eastern' female by Western Orientalism. Both discourses, the Orientalist (traditional and new) and the Arabo-Muslim (also old and modern) impose on women a religious identity, projecting them on one hand as believers and fecund mothers and, on the other hand, as promiscuous concubines or nymphomaniacs although this latter image is only perceived by the sub-conscious in Arab-Islamic setting. This process required the construction of a specific frame of femininity through the religious/orthodox discourse, which could thus legitimate this identity, subsequently legalized by modern endorsements of *Shari'a* in post-colonial personal status codes throughout most of the countries in the area.

It may therefore be argued that Islam should not be totally dismissed as a frame of analysis and interpretation, though more self-consciousness is certainly needed to deal with the problematical values related to it as a discourse of power conjectured by the societies concerned and the World Order. So while Lazreg

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50. Oussedik, 'To Conduct Research on Women', p. 114.

does not address this kind of internal/indigenous male treatment of femininity which is nonetheless as deterministic and reductive as the process she deconstructs within Western perspectives, feminist criticism in both Maghreb and Machrek suffers from a serious limitation: it does not display a sufficient grasp of the assumptions carried over by explorations of female status in cross-cultural perspectives, when undertaken by White Western female scholarship. Therefore, Lazreg does not raise the issue of the problematization of womanhood by discourses by the Periphery and which are just as tyrannical and authoritarian as those emanating from the Metropoly. And the work of feminist theorists such as Sabbah, Mernissi, El Saadawi and others allows at least an undermining of this universal appropriation of female identity and the body by debunking the ideological import of religious, nationalist and culturalist discourses on women.[51] Therefore, female writers need firstly to deconstruct that patriarchal discursive activity allegedly based on foundations of religious truth and secondly to be instrumental in unlearning that cultural socialization,

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51. Publications such as Women Against Fundamentalism were created because of the preeminence of conservative interpretations of Islam in women's lives and in the legislation concerning them and because of the process of intensive Islamification experienced by certain countries, are already theocratic. This process is effective in sustaining traditional patriarchy and in calling for the return of women to the house. Lazreg's argument may indirectly underscore the danger represented by religious extremists against women.

using perhaps their analytical and fictional writing as a process of catharsis and liberation.

To conceive of Islam as a conceptual entity standing outside the flux of history and opposed to modernism and even Westernism in the work of foreign researchers, means that perceptions of their subject of study, the 'Muslim woman', become perverted. This woman is thrown outside any temporal and spatial reality and remains shrouded in veils and mystery; becoming a non-person or a non-woman.

However, while this view is still pervasive in the work of Anglo-American and French female writers and the wider public, a radically different picture is drawn by indigenous feminist treatments of the subject of woman. Nevertheless this contrast is largely - but not exclusively as the chapter on fiction has sought to show - articulated through a new critical appraisal of the old, recurrent topic of Islam. But it is increasingly analyzed as a dynamic historical narrative which women attempt to re-appropriate by imposing 'their' new reading of its structures and reinterpreting them accordingly. This is what Mernissi tends to suggest when she exhorts women to become exegesists of the holy scriptures.[52] This might problematize the relation between the feminine and the religious. And militant feminists in many countries of the Middle East and North Africa are rejecting *de facto* the imposition of the religious framework and identity on women and demanding full

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52. Mernissi, Moslem Paradise, p. 35.

secularisation of public life, thereby actively counteracting the programmes of the powerful Islamist groupings and those sexist prescriptions which had already materialized in the form of family laws. Their practical experiences articulated by their struggle for secularisation and democratization might help realize, at least partly, the concern expressed herein at the theoretical level, that is, the predominance of the Islamic framework in writings on women.

A conventional approach derives from the centrality of Islam in debates on women, that of a recurring binary perspective opposing Islam as an expression of Tradition to a modernist tendency invariably equated with Western influence. So, while in the post-industrial West the oppositional concepts debated at the academic level tend to articulate a contrast between modernism and post-modernism, conservative political and intellectual forces within the Maghreb and the middle East, but also those within Western academic productions, manage to polarize and freeze the discursive and practical formulations about developments in the 'Muslim East' as a confrontation between the forces of tradition and those of modernity. Therefore, it may be argued that this has direct implications for feminist academic work in the region and also for women's identities and popular representations of them locally and universally.

9. 4. The Polarization of Research: Tradition Versus Modernity

The framework drawn by the opposition between traditionalism and modernism is engineered by the dominant discourses, within and without the region concerned, for they both associate Eastern women with reproductive and mystical roles and castigate them whenever they assume more dynamic roles as producers, socio-political actors and thinkers.

Lazreg argues that the Culturalist method which has so far extensively relied on Islam suffers from a major theoretical and methodological limitation, mainly the fact that 'the problems selected for study are limited by the method chosen to study them',[53] with the result that 'authors become unable to address anything but religion and tradition'.[54]

The contrast with the Culturalist approach in this case is not resolved by the adoption of what has emerged so far as the opposite pole of research, namely Social Evolutionary Theory for, according to Lazreg's critique, religion seems to permeate all critical perspectives, including developmentalist endeavours; in other words, religion is also 'made the source of underdevelopment in much of modernization theory'.[55] Another controversial point is the persistent equivalence universally drawn between modernization or modernity and Westernization or

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53. Lazreg, 'Feminism and Difference', p. 85.

54. Lazreg, 'Feminism and Difference', p. 85.

55. Lazreg, 'Feminism and Difference', p. 86.

Westernism on one hand and between Traditionalism or Culturalism and Islam on the other hand, the former seen as a dynamic and inventive process, the latter as stagnating in inertia and impotence. The classic conception which opposes Islam to the West and not to a Judeo-Christian civilization for instance is one example of this argument.

Two Algerian feminist academics, Claude Talahite and Fatiha Hakiki have analyzed the tradition/modernity conflict and noted that its development suggests a growing feminist consciousness. It reveals a process of alienation within an indigenous setting and its treatment by dominant narratives underline an imperialist position. From the conventional and 'traditional' treatment[56] to increasingly radical uses featured in more contemporary writing, the authors note the development of women's criticism towards a more assertive analytical mode. The intermediary phase is marked by mingling of tradition and issues of development or rather what they term 'problems of participation', that is, women's active involvement in economic projects.[57] They argue that the tradition/modernity dichotomy operates in this transitional phase differently: women's integration in the economic/modernist sector is invoked in terms of materialistic and ideological terms, for the sake of national development and efficiency and not for the

56. Hakiki, 'Research on Algerian Women', p. 82.

57. This topic is debated by Hakiki and Talahite in their article 'Research on Algerian Women'.

benefit of women and their rights for self-fulfilment. So this argument cannot pretend to be a feminist one. Unfortunately, the case study provided by the co-authors does not fit their theoretical assumption as they choose the work of a French researcher to represent the feminist mode. The relevance of such a choice is dubious and may be explained by what Lazreg articulated as the French colonial prevalence over Algerian academic life.

Nevertheless, Lazreg's criticism generalizes the state of research on women and overlooks new critical trends. She thus fails to note the changes and internal development of the writing by women on women. For instance, these changes influence an important issue, that of gender and development in national and international contexts and class interests and not in isolation. Feminists are trying to uncover the contradictions of developmentalist endeavours when these retain patriarchal interests and values. Nonetheless, whether they see religion as a cause of underdevelopment or progress has never seemed to be at issue in such writing preoccupied as it is with highlighting traditional conceptions of the feminine as they still hold sway within modernization theory. For instance, the oppositional effect drawn by Haleh Afshar between the values of liberalization and nurturing, intrinsically associated with maleness and femaleness, further contextualize the present problematic.

This debate seems to suggest that the variety of approaches to the dichotomy tradition/modernity have

evolved through stages ranging from the anthropological perspective (inscribed within a colonial discourse) to the transitional phase, to a more radical position. Moreover, the latter rejects the rigid separation established between traditional and modernist frameworks, arguing that they intermingle through the political designs of the state and the social field, often in a confrontational manner. However, subsumed within this structure are other controversial parameters which deserve mention although they have not been examined by feminist criticism in a systematic manner.

Claude Talahite and Fatiha Hakiki point out the imperialist meanings embedded in the early stage of the dualistic notions tradition/modernity by classifying them as follows: traditionalism based on a kinship system of values endorsing authority, honour, obedience and so forth and linked to subsistence economy, prevalent in the Periphery, at least in pre-independence times. And the modernist approach encompasses responsibility, initiative, success and is attached to the industrial economic pattern, that is, that of the Centre. It is interesting to note how this framework is re-duplicated by Western female writers in their analyses of Third World societies where they see that Tradition holds sway and contrast it to their own milieus which they define according to the modernist model and an implicit location of themselves within the realm of a 'free', secular and technological civilization.

For example, let us consider the work of a researcher from Norway Nora Ahlberg who studied communities of Kurd refugees in her country and their situation of exile. She draws the following contrast between the groups concerned, the Kurdish and the Norwegian, following the binary model of tradition versus modernity, East (meaning Islam) versus West. Under the binary opposition of the main doublets '"Traditional"/Kurdish versus "Modern"/Western'[58] which sets the framework of the representations, she describes the two communities as follows:

> Cosmocentric versus anthropocentric; past oriented versus future oriented; hierarchical versus egalitarian; (respect of elders) versus (revolt of the young); group oriented versus individualistic; duty bound versus rights oriented; shame culture versus guilt culture; (segregating) versus (integrating); network care versus institutionalized care.[59]

There is an implicit classification of the two races in the division drawn between what she labels 'belief system characteristics' (this term is rather confusing as it does not apply to the representation of the Norwegian community as described above; the community which appears endowed with a belief system is the kurdish one alone). The broad picture drawn by what is an exercise in

58. Paper presented in June 1992 at Warwick University by a Norwegian researcher Nora Ahlberg: 'Kurd Refugee Minority in Norway'.

59. I have indicated the confrontational relation between the two sets of values by adding the term 'versus'. In the presentation by the author, this relation is reflected by an arrow.

representation and self-representation on the part of Ahlberg is simplistic and therefore reductive. While Norwegians appear as modern, enterprising and forward-looking, actively engaging with the complexities of the world and history, Kurdish individuals are projected as traditional (in other words, 'not liable to change' or develop), religious (that is superstitious), passive, rather backward and inward-looking. This kind of exercise which essentializes the 'Other' in cultural (and implicitly religious) terms apparently owes much to traditional Orientalism and colonial ethnography and sets out to retain in the modern world the rigid and outdated structures of study and representation of non-Western communities and individuals as they were being formulated for the last two centuries.

But the controversial nature of this kind of Orientalist analysis does not reside solely in the legacy it shares with colonial and neo-colonial styles of writing and investigation. The modernity versus tradition dichotomy establishes a gendered hierarchy between the 'Muslim' East and the 'Christian' West, the former associated with attributes of femininity (and fertility or reproduction) and the latter with those of masculinity. A gendered reading of colonization and revolution discussed hitherto (in chapter three) suggested a similar contingency.

However, Eastern feminists have challenged this tradition of representations. Hakiki and Talahite identify this approach with the early phase of women's

criticism in North Africa, when it was still enmeshed in colonial traditions and styles of representations, deriving from their uncritical reproduction of ethnology and anthropology as Western social sciences. This traditional method has evolved considerably in women's work in the region, though this has not yet been adequately acknowledged by the work of Western scholars.

It is mostly within more recent feminist critiques of Social Evolutionary Theory that the concepts of tradition and modernism are probed further as the notion of development becomes problematized and historicized. The Traditionalist effect itself is no longer examined as an immutable phenomenon but as a dynamic process enmeshed in the workings of the communal and international networks. In this case, Tradition cannot put itself beyond the control of the state as feared by some critics or become the privileged or 'natural' vehicle of Islamic ideology.

The following chapter will point out further implications entailed by the framework Tradition versus Modernity for feminist scholarship on one hand and the images and self-images of women within indigenous and international settings on the other.

CHAPTER TEN

CONDITIONS OF FEMINIST DISCOURSE

10. 1. Origins of the Women's Movement

This section aims at questioning the assumption that Euro-American feminist thought has extended its ideals of justice and freedom abroad to encompass the rest of the world, notably helping to trigger movements for female emancipation in Africa, Asia and South America. The influence that feminism in the West has supposedly had on the rest of womankind seems to have prevailed during two important historical moments; namely throughout the colonial era and during the sixties, the decade of the sexual revolution in the West.

It is important to re-assess the indigenous woman's movement whose historical background and contemporary developments are claimed, albeit tacitly, by external sources. However, although this movement contributed to raising Western awareness of gender inequality, there is a need to look at its alleged role outside the countries of the centre in more critical terms. It may then be possible to assess its relation to the women's movement in the so-called East and draw a more exhaustive picture of the overall conditions presently framing women's scholarship in the areas concerned.

The assumptions made concerning the positive influence of the sexual revolution on the liberation of women in the South can be called into question. A good example is Caroline Ramazanoglu's Feminism and Contradictions of Oppression[1] in which she reviews the main divisive issues between women across continents and cultures but falls into the Europeocentric trap: attributing Third World feminism to the liberation movement engaged in by Western women in the sixties. Speaking about what she calls 'first-wave feminism' as it developed mainly in Western Europe and the US during that period, she claims that 'feminist ideas [in the West] quickly spread to societies with rather different internal struggles and to the Third World'.[2] This, in spite of her claim that mainstream feminism in the West is not 'the sole natural 'producer' of feminist awareness'.[3] She highlights an important issue that arose within the development of liberal and socialist feminisms as to whether feminists were not eluding larger issues of oppression which their respective governments were striving to maintain in the South part of the world through their colonial occupation and which was causing misery and hardship to both males and females there. The author points out the political implication of feminist positions when issues of race, politics and economics are

1. Caroline Ramazanoglu, Feminism and Contradictions of Oppression (London: Routledge, 1989).

2. Ramazanoglu, Contradictions of Oppression, p. 5.

3. Ramazanoglu, Contradictions of Oppression, p. 126.

addressed, because this particular feminism 'was not only produced by women in relatively affluent societies, but in those societies which have dominated and divided the world between them in the course of the expansion of capitalism':

> New-wave feminism is then seen not only as offering a very limited vision of liberation which does not address the main forms of oppression by other women, but also as actively or passively colluding in these forms of oppression.[4]

Marxist feminists, actively engaged in the women's liberation movement, soon realized that they were fighting a common enemy with the populations of the South, that is, the White male capitalist supremacy which was subjugating them, at home and exploiting the rest of the world. This belief led them to conceptualize their struggle in more political terms and to draw the commonality of their struggle with members of independence movements in other continents.[5] This underlines the influence - although limited but seldom admitted - which the vast independence movement had indirectly on the women's liberation struggle in the West, more notably on militant left-wing groups and activists. It may also be argued that although they

4. Ramazanoglu, Contradictions of Oppression, p. 127.

5. The particular case of Algeria illustrates this point: women from the French feminist movement spoke against the torture of Algerian female prisoners during the war of liberation, helping to free some of them. Notably, Simone de Beauvoir and Gisèle Halimi wrote Djamila Boupacha: the Story of the Torture of a Young Algerian Girl which Shocked Liberal French Opinion (Paris: Gallimard,1962).

contributed to shaping a new social reality, they gained from the political developments occurring in the world at large. Western feminists employed the contentious notion of being 'colonized'[6] to describe their own experiences with men and patriarchy; an analogy was thus drawn between the global phenomenon of female subordination under patriarchy and that of colonized populations under the yoke of imperialist rule. In short, women were found to be a 'colony'.[7] It may be right to assert that the new anti-colonialist terminology, discourse and ideology served the woman's movement in the West at least at the linguistic and conceptual level. But it may also be argued that the prevailing parameter in popular and many academic discourses is the belief that the movement for women's rights in the West acted as a detonator of a revolution which spread world-wide in the following decades.

Other historical conditions are believed to have contributed to the phenomenon of female emancipation, namely colonial occupation. It allegedly engineered emancipatory ambitions in the colonized female through the influence exerted on her by the woman settler. This position is portrayed by the Indian writer Kumari Jayawardena whose introduction to her book Feminism and

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6. Western women, after all, have not been *colonized*. The problem of this kind of labelling is that it works as an appropriation of other people's experiences.

7. This led the African feminist Awa Thiam to declare that if 'women were a colony, Black women were the last colony of all'. See the introduction to her book, Black Sisters, Speak Out.

Nationalism in the Third World[8] offers an ambiguous message about the emergence of feminist consciousness in Asia. Although her study mainly concerns Asia, its parameters apply equally to the global issue tackled here regarding the conception of feminists in the West as the originators of feminist values. She claims that these were already rooted in the societies concerned but later revokes this idea when she asserts that the capitalist penetration of the Third World led to struggles against all oppressive forces, including the misogynist power embodied in indigenous patriarchal structures. So, while she rejects the notion of the West's influence on the emergence of Third World feminism, she adds ambivalently:

> I have thought it necessary to show that feminism was not imposed on the Third-world by the West, but rather that historical circumstances produced material and ideological changes that affected women, even though the impact of imperialism and Western thought was admittedly among the significant elements in these historical circumstances.[9]

The contentious aspect of her statement lies in her suggestion that colonialism offered opportunities for the colonized to experience or even acquire Western knowledge. Part of this knowledge was the acquisition of feminist principles, counted as a major force for change. She speaks of 'women's consciousness as it emerged in the countries under study after the impact of colonialism and

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8. Kumari Jayawardena, Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World (London: Zed Books, 1986).

9. Jayawardena, Feminism and Nationalism, p. 2.

the experience of Western society and thought'.[9] She ascribes to colonial females a considerable role in shaping positively the lives of the indigenous female population. According to her, Western women, whether missionaries, housewives or nurses, had an irrevocably enlightening effect on local women, in terms of female emancipation and feminist awareness:

> While emphasizing the internal factors that led to the rise of the feminist movement in Asia, recognition has to be made of the role of Western women, who introduced various ideological strands of opinion which influenced Asian feminist consciousness. For example, women missionaries played a significant part in the process of education, in mitigating discriminatory practices and in putting forward alternative religious ideologies and social practices.[10]

She goes on to add:

> Other European women who lived in Asia as the wives of colonial officials and professionals (doctors, nurses, teachers...), as supporters of local religions or esoteric movement, or as feminists, suffragists, pioneers of birth control and activists in nationalist and revolutionary struggles, also played an important part.[11]

This assertion can be invalidated by historical evidence provided by several studies on the disruption of Third World societies and economies under the impact of colonization and the introduction of capitalist models of

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9. Jayawardena, Feminism and Nationalism, p. 2.

10. Jayawardena, Feminism and Nationalism, p. 20.

11. Jayawardena, Feminism and Nationalism, p. 20.

production. As a result of the destructuration of the indigenous community, women lost power and status, becoming increasingly impoverished because of the disintegration of the subsistence economy.[13] Contrary to Jayawardena's allegations, European females were often supporters of the colonial status-quo,[14] whether as suffragists in their own societies or as teachers and farmers in the colonized lands. Part of the process of validating historical feminist experiences in the Third World at large concerns the examination of European women's roles, particularly those who were actively involved in the life or the administration of the colonies. Again, the argument seems to be flawed by a fundamental misapprehension about the impact which colonization had on women's roles. In the eyes of the local people, the female settler was associated with the imperialist enterprise set by her male countrymen and was not always trusted. Although there were cases whereby women from the colonial community effectively contributed to transforming the politics or the values of the societies in question in constructive ways, they constitute by any estimate, a handful in the whole of

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13. See for instance the work of Maria Rosa Cutrufelli, Women of Africa: Roots of Oppression (London: Zed Press, 1983).

14. There is a brief presentation of the European woman settler in Chapter two. See also to mention the fictional occurrence of the colonial female character like Suzy in Nedjma examined in chapter four. Although an object of desire for both male groups, the French and the Algerian, Suzy does not inspire the colonized protagonists in the way Nedjma did as she is perceived (in conscious terms) as threatening. She is considered sexually free or promiscuous but unapproachable by virtue of her colonial status.

Asia and Africa. More numerous were female colonists who had, consciously or not, more individualistic and less humanitarian concerns towards the natives like sharing male colonial power and strengthening the imperial edifice. Their attitudes and deeds need to be located within this motivation, that is, they have to be looked upon in the colonial context as interventionist, sometimes protectionist, often patronizing and ultimately exploitative towards the colonized as a whole.[14] Ramazanoglu attests to the fact that 'imperial and colonial relationships have shaped the experience of third world women in ways which have benefited Western women'.[15]

Another problematical aspect of such criticism, illustrated here by Jayawardena's work, is the assertion that some famous women from the history of Western countries also inspired women in other continents who read about them. She mentions for instance outstanding heroines of the French revolution, Madame Roland and Madame de Staël among others, presented as the precursors of Japanese, Vietnamese and Chinese feminisms:

> Similarly, heroines of the Russian Revolutionary movement such as Safia Perovskya and Vera Figner were often cited in these countries; and the writings of other Western women, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Emma Goldman, Olive Schreiner and British and American

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14. An indirect assessment of the negative role of French female colonists in African countries occupied by France during the last two centuries is provided by Knibiehler's La femme au temps des colonies.

15. Ramazanoglu, Contradictions of Oppression, p. 126.

> suffragists, were known in Asian feminist circles.[17]

The fame of these women had certainly reached frontiers of far away lands and therefore they became known to the educated elites abroad. But it is difficult to generalize about the impact of Western thinkers on the indigenous population, for only a small fraction composed of the urban literate elite and female members of the upper class benefited from any positive import, intellectual or otherwise. These individuals were often alienated and marginal to the mainstream of their own societies, especially because they were commonly seen as being 'Westernized', that is, on the enemy's side. So, her claim that middle class women read about feminism in the West and spread its lessons becomes hollow, notably because the presumed recipients of this knowledge usually lived in rural areas, with restricted access to schooling and books. The work of French or Russian feminists is unlikely to have had an impact on their lives, constrained as they were by conditions of living in colonial or semi-colonial systems.

Feminisms in countries of the developing world as a whole may be initially located within the various political and social movements that they underwent in the nineteenth, the twentieth centuries and later in the mid-sixties. The 1960's were a crucial historical moment in a world shaken to its roots by wars of liberation and

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17. Jayawardena, Feminism and Nationalism, p. 21.

revolutionary struggles to overthrow colonial regimes, feudal dynasties and call off protectorates or mandates. So the winds stirred up by the decolonization movement swiftly swept away the colonial empires which, as they crumbled, released a new collective spirit for freedom, peace and justice. In those countries which experienced revolutionary and constitutional changes, women contributed in various ways to the struggle, sometimes going against the grain by throwing away veils and customs, eager to join the men in a collective struggle. These attitudes, conspicuous by the courage and bravery displayed by the female actors, reveal a profound awareness of the need to transform the existing social, political and economic. The desire for change thus does not appear to be an exclusive male prerogative nor a Western virtue.

Feminist ideology and signs of gender consciousness may broadly be located within the various political and social movements that this part of the world experienced during the decolonization era. Contrary to the belief that colonial females initiated change, it was the minority of male and female progressists and nationalists who put forward radical political programmes and articulated new aspirations, addressing more or less forcefully the 'women question' as part of the wider struggle for national liberation or constitutional and revolutionary changes. The histories of Algeria, Egypt, Iran and Turkey, Yemen and Palestine, are a telling

illustration of this development.[18] Radicalism regressed in the immediate post-revolution phase because of a general attitude on the part of the new leaders (mostly male) who simply pushed the issue of women's rights off the political agenda as soon as liberation was achieved.

Post-colonial feminisms as they developed interacted with the emergence of radical politics that overthrew colonial rules, contributing to destabilize imperial set-ups. In this respect, the case of Egyptian history is a particularly interesting one, a typical instance of the harmonious merging of feminist politics and social and political struggles as witnessed by the period of radical politics of the late forties and early fifties.[19] Later, the disorienting effect which followed the access of Egypt to political independence took its toll on feminist issues which witnessed a resurgence. But other countries' recent history (North Yemen and Palestine for instance) attest also to the fact that women have often understood the general political struggle in terms of their own liberation and their individual or collective contribution to the prevailing debates on or fights for political rights and freedom. Broadly speaking, the development of feminist struggle in the Arab areas at large shows that the effective birth of feminist consciousness is part of a wider context textured by

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18. But the work of Jayawardena attests to a parallel phenomenon in the case of Asian countries.

19. Some perspectives on the political struggle led by women are offered in a publication called 'Khamsin', Women in the Middle East, ed. by Magida Salman (London: Zed Books LTD, 1987).

nationalism and designs for national liberation. For Mernissi too, 'the feminist movement was an expression and byproduct of Arab-Muslim nationalism'.[20] It seems evident, from the examples provided by a wide range of countries in North Africa, the Middle East and Asia that the issue of women's rights and the polarization of debates and struggles around it becomes most prominent during those periods of social malaise, political instability and constitutional change. New definitions of feminism are however generated by the present pre-industrial stage whereby the control of reality and resources is being fought for by the forces of modernism and conservatism, secularism and religion and ultimately between pro-democratic and totalitarian tendencies.

Finally, our interest in discussing the origins of women's movements in North Africa and the Middle East stems from a specific concern: to authenticate feminism there as an indigenous practice and not an imported product from the West as many tend to believe. It is part of the process of validating feminist experiences in the area because the assumption in question addresses directly the originality of their principles and the relevance of their methods of struggle. In a recent paper presented to a British audience, Nawal El Saadawi corrects the view that pan-Arab feminism is a Western invention,[21] using her research in the history of the

20. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 13.

21. Nawal El Saadawi spoke on this topic at the University of York, during the 1990 session of the Annual Conference on Women and Development.

countries concerned as testimony to the existence of a great number of women who displayed resilience and resourcefulness in resisting male domination and of groups of people who fought together the injustices and exploitation imposed on them by the ruling classes.

So, this view underlines the Eurocentrism of feminist reasoning in the West which has not yet transcended its own frame of reference to discover other feminisms articulated by various cultures and historical developments across the world. To posit Western traditions of feminism as the universal model of thought and behaviour for all women amounts to a negation of those 'other' visions of liberation which are not exclusively grounded in anti-sexist fights and oppression from gender but also from poverty, colonialism and neo-imperialism, class and religion. The position of mainstream academic feminism in the US and Western Europe appears limited by its own framework, intellectual and empirical, at the centre of a broad conception of feminism. The assumption discussed in this section about the origin of feminism in the West appears to be grounded in the hidden view - largely Europeocentric - that any Western model of behaviour or thought is systematically deemed positive and therefore eagerly pursued and emulated. This derives from the Universalist tendencies of Euro-American thought, including feminist knowledge. But it is noted that feminist struggles and debates have taken place elsewhere, shaping themselves on other

struggles of liberation, social and national. Ramazanoglu's perspective underlines how crucial it has become for all feminists to understand the multiplicity and the variety characterizing female experiences of subordination and liberation according to a number of cultural, educational, racial, ethnic, national and material locations.

It is also interesting to look more closely at the implications which the present topic might uncover in terms of critical discourse. There is, subtly woven within the assumption that First World feminists are 'creators' of universal feminism the idea that they 'fathered' feminism as they become invested with attributes of maleness. In other words, the authority bestowed on them by their portrayal as 'authors' of feminist ideology is not neutral but gendered: it is translated at the discursive level as a manifestation of phallogocentrism. So the present contentious claim about the emergence of Third World feminisms constitutes a fundamental category of cross-cultural criticism which raises questions about the integrity and value of different practices of feminism. On the other hand, it inscribes First World textuality by women into a phallocentric discursive tradition. In the case of women writers from the area, such as Kumari Jayawardena herself, their uncritical allegiance to this kind of Eurocentric argument, indicates a manifestation of the colonial mode of writing pervading some indigenous narratives.

Indeed, some points of criticism are acknowledged in more recent feminist literature and not just by those writers who examine women's experiences cross-culturally, such as Caroline Ramazanoglu. But the use of such perspective shows that some White Western female academics have not substantially nor sufficiently decentred their own discursive framework. The task of re-assessing and redefining the categories of feminist work in the West, Eurocentrically called the mainstream, is important, in the light of outside input provided by feminist contributions from the so-called Periphery or the margins of the developed world.

Moreover, there is a need to consider the nature and origin of feminist commitments in the region This concerns the attitudes of Islamist individuals particularly and society generally towards women who define themselves as secular, pro-democrat or pro-feminists and who therefore arouse suspicion about their loyalty and cultural integrity. Part of the blame laid at the door of these women resides in their alleged allegiance to the ethos of feminism as an inheritance from an imperial Christian Western culture. They are tacitly accused of adhering to a tradition introduced in their own cultural environment by foreign dominant groups. It is not innocuous though as it misconceives indigenous feminist practices and ideas, object of this study, and perverts representations of women according to dubious notions which do not always convey a truthful picture about the 'women question' nor the women

themselves. Feminists then encounter, time and again, prejudice, mainly that their beliefs and battles are only provincial and imitative of those of Western women.

10. 2. Feminism and the Legacy of (Neo) Colonialism

Exploring the relationship between neo-colonialism and feminism has become a major concern for a large number of feminists world-wide, although many studies tend to focus on colonial history and past experiences of Orientalism. This thesis suggests there is a continuity between traditional and post-modern forms of colonial power and discourse as a broad conceptual framework for the treatment of gender issues and the specific role of women. To frame the 'women question' within imperialism, past and present, international and local, political and cultural, will help to relocate women, their experiences of subordination and struggle within a historical perspective which is lacking at the moment. It will also help to point out fundamental problematic areas that need to be addressed as the future of feminism, in its international dimensions, is at stake.

So the intent here is not simply to explore the attitudes adopted by women in Arab countries towards the forms of feminism existing in the Occidental world nor to review the contribution (conscious or unconscious) of First World feminists to imperialist politics or their resistance to them. The purpose of this study is rather to determine the broader international framework of power

relations within which the feminist work and thought of both groups are to be located in the first instance.

A more systematic and analytical critical endeavour within the anti-Orientalist vein as used by feminists is provided by Chandra Mohanty . She establishes the link between feminist and colonialist discourses by underlining the creation of a global phenomenon, the so-called 'third world woman' who thus appears in the writing of some First World female writers:

> This average third world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually contrived) and being 'third world' (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, religious, domesticated, family-oriented, victimized, etc...).[22]

The author reinforces further her argument by providing it with the notion of the 'third-world difference' and its production or emergence within Western cultural discourse:

> Since discussions of the various themes I identified earlier (e. g., kinship, education, religion, etc,) are conducted in the context of the relative 'underdevelopment' of the third world [...] third world women as a group or category are automatically and necessarily defined as: religious (read 'not progressive'), family oriented (read: traditional'), legal minors (read 'they-are-not-still-conscious-of-their-rights), illiterate (read 'ignorant'), domestic (read 'backward') and sometimes revolutionary (read 'their-country-is-in-a-state-of-war; they-must-fight'!).[23]

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22. Chandra Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses' Feminist Review, no. 30 (Autumn 1988), pp. 61-88.

23. Mohanty, 'Western Eyes', p. 80.

This is juxtaposed to the production of First world preeminence which is then mediated implicitly through the writings of Western women. In the words of Mohanty, the combination of the 'third-world difference' and the 'sexual difference' (women of the South seen as asexual, virgins or sexually oppressed and exploited) lead to 'assumptions about Western women as secular, liberated, and having control over their own lives'.[24] White middle class women in North America and Western Europe, may reproduce the Orientalist canon by adopting the dominating and authoritative voice which the Western academic and colonialist establishment has used since the Renaissance to speak about Muslims, Islam and the East. Edward Said acknowledges the dangers of using the structure of cultural domination by formerly oppressed minorities like Third World people upon themselves and upon others, which are likely to occur.

It is to be noted that a discourse of power like Orientalism is not monolithic but is constituted of women's contributions also to systems of knowledge. White Western women, in spite of their historical situation as an oppressed minority (like the formerly colonized people of Said) have used, though the authoritative voice of their leaders, structures of domination in dealing with non-European women and played a role, willingly or unconsciously, in the

24. Mohanty, 'Western Eyes', p. 81.

'Orientalizing' exercise performed on men and women whose countries were subjugated to foreign occupation, whether the latter was direct or mediated through protectorates and mandates. The dangers as mentioned by Said hitherto have remained prevalent in the post-colonial age as Western women have become increasingly integrated in the capitalist system of their respective countries, whether it be in politics, economics, journalism, administration, business and academic practice. So, European women, following the tradition established over the centuries by male scholars are bound to take up or partake in the Orientalist practice and theoretical work as it is presently developing in the countries of the Centre. As I have stressed elsewhere, Orientalism's construction of models of womanhood was crucial to the Western thinking about the East. The process by which Western women approached Arab women and reproduced Orientalism, following the male pattern, merging feminist or pro-feminist claims with the projects of a colonial enterprise was identified as being a manifestation of an 'Orientalist feminism' or a form of 'feminist Orientalism'.[25] Nevertheless, the politics or the dynamics of power showing the 'superiority' of First world culture and consistently of male and female Westerners over 'Orientals' still prevail in the various discourses - scholarly or otherwise - on 'Muslim', Arab or 'Middle Eastern' women.

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25. I formulated this idea in a separate paper.

According to Chandra Mohanty, the problem is articulated in terms of a chasm between 'Western feminist self-representation' and 'Western feminist representation of women in the third world'.[26] This has led to distorted views of women from foreign cultures and also to misconceptions of one's own image and worth. But Chandra Mohanty later specifies her definition of the problem of power located within a cross-cultural conception of the 'sexual difference' between First and Third world women, itself constitutive of what she identifies as the 'third world difference', that is, 'that stable, ahistorical something that apparently oppresses most if not all the women in these countries'.[27] She elaborates further on what seems to be at the core of the power relations between women from both the developed and the developing worlds:

> It is in the production of this 'third world difference' that Western feminisms appropriate and colonize the constitutive complexities which characterize the lives of women in these countries. It is in this process of discursive homogenization and systematization of the oppression of women in the third world that power is exercised in much of recent feminist writing, and this power needs to be defined and named.[28]

Women writers from North Africa and the Middle East try to protect their work from the distorted Orientalist

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26. Mohanty, 'Western Eyes', p. 81.

27. Mohanty, 'Western Eyes', p. 63.

28. Mohanty, 'Western Eyes', p. 63.

interpretations and associations which persist within contemporary Orientalist attitudes. They need to speak on women's issues in a critical mode of thinking that can reverse the Western cultural and ideological domination. But some feminists are well aware of the impact of Orientalism in shaping the attitudes and conceptions of Western audiences towards them, that is, the expression of familiar and worn out prejudices and stereotypes such as Western representations of Muslim women as a pack of wives for a fatty oilsheikh, veiled figures, belly dancers and so forth,[29] and have expressed their concern. For instance, they tend to warn their Western readers about such associations in special prefaces. In her 'Note to the Western reader' in Beyond the Veil, Fatima Mernissi raises the following question:

> Is there a nascent female liberation movement in the Middle East and North Africa similar to those appearing in Western countries? For decades this kind of question has blocked and distorted analysis of the situation of Muslim women, keeping it at the level of senseless comparisons and unfounded conclusions.[30]

And adds:

> It is a well established tradition to discuss Muslim women by comparing them, implicitly or explicitly, to Western women. This tradition reflects the general pattern that prevails in

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29. See Rana Kabbani, Europe's Myths of the Orient (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986). This book retraces the most fundamental structures of the phenomenon of 'Orientalizing' women in the Arab areas while it reveals its deep connections with imperialism.

30. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 7.

> both East and West when the issue is who is more civilized than whom.[31]

The implicit question concerns 'who is more woman than whom', with the Euro-American female believed to stand for the 'standard' by which all other women are evaluated. It may be safe to assume that women in the Third World as a whole are increasingly aware of the bias which inform writings in the First World that treats them and their lifestyles as subjects of study. The workings of colonial hegemony, whether in cultural or material fields, inherent in Orientalist/colonial discourse and practice, whether traditional or modern, exhort these women to question the reliability and intellectual honesty of studies and criticism undertaken in the Occident on the subject of the so-called Arab woman, still represented as a 'Fatma', an exotic female or a shadow behind a yashmak.

Nawal El Saadawi speaks of 'the conscious premeditated bias which makes [Europeans] portray the East and the Arabs in an unfavourable light' and for whom 'Islam is the only religion that has made of women the objects of sexual pleasure for men'.[32] And Fatima Mernissi believes that:

> Muslims were dismissed as promiscuous and many crocodile tears were shed over the terrible fate of Muslim women. In this situation, Muslims found themselves defending anachronistic institutions by many Muslims' own

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31. Mernissi, Beyond Veil, p. 7.

32. El Saadawi, Hidden Face, p. 96.

> standards like polygamy, arguing for example, that it is better to institutionalize men's polygamous desires than to force them to have mistresses.[33]

So, it may be argued at this point that some new discourses in the area are trying in their embryonic form to dissociate themselves from this passive Orientalization. But, as for Said and other writers who deconstruct Orientalism and colonialism, the problem of the appropriation and use of 'Western' academic forms remains as one is both inside and outside the Occidental discourse when writing of Orientalism and against it. The development of feminist criticism alongside colonial/Orientalist discourse theory in the West raises questions regarding the relevancy of feminism as a militant movement as well as the nature of the relation between its theory and practice. Inadvertently, Western women writers derive part of their power over other females from the Orientalist legacy and the colonial past, strengthened by the present technological equipment, expertise and level of economic development achieved by their countries. Orientalism itself can be seen as an imperial enterprise of control and appropriation and not purely innocent knowledge about the East and Easterners. Said describes it as a complex network of historic power strategies, the product of an active process of creativity, cultural, material, military and political.

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33. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 7.

Irvin Cemil Schick discusses the inherent discursive power of Western feminism in the following terms:

> Despite its fundamentally critical outlook, feminism, too, suffers from some limitations imposed by its own lineage; born as a Eurocentric post-Enlightenment intellectual current, it occasionally succumbs to a certain mode of historicism and linear thinking that strongly affects its perspectives on non-Western societies and on non-Western women in particular.[34]

Chandra Mohanty also articulates the problematic of power within First World feminist theory in similar terms, locating it beyond the premiss of feminism itself which derives from:

> A certain mode of appropriation and codification of 'scholarship' and 'knowledge' about women in the third world by particular analytic categories employed in writings on the subject which take as their primary point of reference feminist interests as they have been articulated in the US and Western Europe.[35]

Lazreg examines how Western discourse by female authors relate to women in North Africa and the Middle East and to anthropological and ethnographic modes of writing. In her article on the subject, appropriately entitled 'The Perils of Writing as Woman on Women in Algeria', which analyzes the relation between feminist and colonialist discourses, she examines the problem of power within

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34. Irvin Cemil Schick, 'Representing Middle Eastern Women: Feminism and Colonial Discourse', Feminist Studies, 16, no. 2 (Summer 1990), pp. 345-375.

35. Mohanty, 'Western Eyes', p. 61.

feminist epistemology from two vantage points: firstly from that of US and French women's writings on Algerian women and secondly from that of Algerian feminist academics on women in their region. In her view, the problem of the interrelationship between imperialism and feminism does not lie solely in the mode of implementing an instrumental and authoritative discourse in its appropriation of women from North Africa and the Middle East as subjects of study; it lies fundamentally within Western feminism itself. In other words, US and French feminist projects are seen as essentially thwarted right from the outset. This led Marnia Lazreg to argue that 'academic feminism has yet to break away from the philosophical and theoretical heritage it has so powerfully questioned'[36] and, further on, she adds that the 'intellectual traditional assumptions out of which academic feminism developed':

> Although it questions traditional assumptions, academic feminism has often neglected to investigate its own premises. If it were to do so more often, it might become apparent that 'traditional' social science categories have not yet been transformed but have been given a different sex instead.[37]

She analyzes the present predicament in the light of methodologies borrowed from various disciplines, including social science, philosophy and discourse analysis, all part of a male determined epistemology and

36. Lazreg, 'Feminism and Difference', p. 82.

37. Lazreg, 'Feminism and Difference', p. 82.

praxis which Western feminists failed to question adequately and perhaps to transform from within. For instance, she refers to 'the power of interpretation'[38] which this male tradition seems to confer on First World White middle class feminist writers. Consequently, they retain a position of power over 'other' women, from different class, racial, ethnic, educational and professional backgrounds. She argues that such power is defined as peculiar because it is granted by society at large which is still male-dominated and whose values have remained masculinist.[39] This concern invalidates the egalitarian principles and the anti-exclusion values purportedly attached to the feminist struggle, a contention which Lazreg defines as 'gynocentrism' and expresses as follows:

> When the power of men over women is replaced by the power of women over women, feminism as an intellectual movement presents a caricature of the very institutions it was meant to question.[40]

This raises other issues. I do not wish to repeat Lazreg's study in detail but it seems, at this point, that her critical perspective provides a systematic theoretical basis for understanding issues of power within the notion of feminism itself and between feminisms across cultures and national frontiers, a much

38. Lazreg, 'Feminism and Difference', p. 96.

39. Lazreg, 'Feminism and Difference', p. 97.

40. Lazreg, 'feminism and Difference', p. 97.

needed viewpoint in the present discussion of the links between imperialism and gender studies in East and West. Her critique also seems to raise, in implicit terms, the issue of the discrepancy existing between feminism inside and outside academic circles.

Lazreg attempts to explain the problem of power in Western feminism as an academic discipline in more detail. Feminist thought, at least in its post-modern phase, owes much to the work of male academics such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. She criticizes feminist use of Foucauldian theory, highlighting another paradox which academic feminism in the West has yet to address, namely the pervasive power of discourse in its analytical formulations because 'subsuming all reality under discourse, as Foucault does, has resulted in a shift from the women's lived reality to endless discoursing about it'.[41] She explains:

> Foucault's conception of power as being decentered has legitimized the view, among some academic feminists according to which power over women-in-general is diffuse. In so doing, the actual instrumentality of power that some women (for example, academic women) exercise over other women (such as Third World women) is neglected.[42]

She criticizes the distorted impact that the Derridean concept of difference has had on feminist theorization because it was essentially conceived as based on

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41. Lazreg, 'Feminism and Difference', p. 96.

42. Lazreg, 'Feminism and Difference', p. 96.

'misapprehension of difference'.[43] This was due to a more common criticism which celebrates difference and so-called cultural, national or gender specificities suggested by interpretations of Derrida's work. This argument can be exemplified by the conceptualization of difference as Mohanty's categories of 'third world difference' and 'sexual difference' have shown: they constitute fundamentally different paradigms between women from the industrialized North and those from the developing South.

The legacy of Orientalist and colonialist discourses for scholarship and epistemology in both East and West is not exposed only through examinations of US and French feminists' academic activities, but also informs the work of indigenous feminists in the region under study, that is, from Maghreb and Machrek.[44] Her criticism of North African and Middle Eastern feminists invokes rejecting their intellectual production as being fraught with the distortions and defects due to the imposition of a colonial discursive mode:

> What I discovered was a continuity between the traditional social science modes of apprehending North African and Middle Eastern societies rooted as they are in French colonial epistemology and academic women's treatment from these societies.[45]

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43. Lazreg, 'Feminism and Difference', p. 96.

44. This case has already been argued in chapter nine with regard the centrality of Islam in analyses of the position of women by female researchers, following a tradition set by Western intellectuals and social scientists (male and female) in the last two centuries.

45. Lazreg, 'Feminism and Difference', p. 83.

This leads to their uncritical reproduction and mimetic use of scholarly concerns and analytical categories deemed significant by Western scholarship. More specifically, she criticizes Arab feminists for being unaware of the oppressive and exploitative elements pertaining to studies of women from the area under study when undertaken by First World female researchers. It is worth quoting her own words on the subject as her criticism seems to be grounded in two major assertions:

> 'Eastern' feminists writing for a Western audience about women in their home countries have done so with the general unstated assumption that US feminist knowledge can be expanded or accommodated but seldom questioned.[46]

Furthermore:

> Although US feminists (like their European counterparts) have sought to define and carve out a space in which to ground their criticism, 'Eastern' feminists have simply adjusted their inquiry to fill the blanks in the geographical distribution made available to them by US feminist liberalism.[47]

Again, although this appears valid on a broad basis, some doubts are raised about its relevancy concerning particular points. For instance, Lazreg does not seem to take into account the changes which affected feminist

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46. Lazreg, 'Feminism and Difference', p. 82.

47. Lazreg, 'Feminism and Difference', p. 82.

work in the region concerned, especially in the last decade, and to give due recognition to the growing self-consciousness it now displays towards issues of race, ethnicity, class, social justice and imperialism in its multiform manifestations. It appears that her critical stance vis-a-vis indigenous feminists is no less deterministic and generalistic. She states very broad formulations, in spite of the fact that the central argument remains largely substantiated, strengthened by the material, cultural and military hegemony of the West and its political ascendency. In addition, she does not give consideration to the conditions determining the emergence of a voice among female writers working and living in the developing world and which are so radically different from those surrounding women academics in the industrial West.[48] There is no adequate recognition of the counter forces, patriarchal, socio-economic and political, which mitigate against intellectuals in countries ruled by undemocratic regimes and, with the exception of the Gulf states, also constrained by material hardship. There is a need to account for this kind of impediment in order to comprehend and account for the knowledge of feminists, especially from North Africa,

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48. Some of these conditions were briefly reviewed in chapter seven. These academics, at least those who work in Arab universities, do not enjoy easy access to the books published in the West about women in their countries, nor do they benefit in a systematic manner from research grants and resources to travel abroad and contact foreign academic institutions and researchers. So, in a material sense, they are not always aware of the writings of First World women about women in their region.

before embarking on a critique of their attitudes towards Western literature. She herself is speaking from a position of power, reproducing, by virtue of her involvement within a Western academic institution, some of the 'gynocentrism'[49] which, she believes, is inherent in the work of prominent women academics in the West.

However, the few Western books on women in Arab societies which have found their way into the libraries and bookshops of the countries concerned have been read critically and assessed in the light of anti-imperialist criteria. Two such works, indicative of the French critical trend on Algeria and of the North African reception of this kind of literature are Germaine Tillion's Republic of Cousins and Juliette Minces' House of Obedience.[50] The former has been judged more or less progressive by Lazreg who appreciates its attempt to break traditional classifications relegating women to the ghettos of race, colour, nationality and religion and integrating them into a Mediterranean group, alongside females from southern Italy, France, Greece, Spain,

49. Gynocentrism is the term used by Marnia Lazreg in her article 'to speak about 'the exercise of discursive power by some women over others', p. 96.

50. Juliette Minces, The House of Obedience (London: Zed Press, 1982); Germaine Tillion, The Republic of Cousins. A more interesting version of such studies which include women from the Southern part of the Mediterranean into a global cultural area - the Mediterranean - with shared features of female oppression and patriarchal dominance between all societies concerned are perhaps the following: Femmes et politique en Méditteranée, ed. by Christiane Souriau (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1980); Women of the Mediterranean, ed. by Monique Gadant (London: Zed Books LTD, 1986). It is a growing trend in women's studies, especially in France, to look at Maghribi women as part of a Mediterranean setting.

etc,...[51] However, twenty years earlier, in 1967, another Algerian academic, Fadéla M'Rabet, attacked the same book for its Eurocentrism and for lumping together women from different religious and cultural systems. So, what was accounted for as a valuable exercise in de-ghettozation by one critic is judged negatively by another as a manifestation of Eurocentrism. She expresses her surprise at this categorisation, which, according to her, is one of the many 'fables' Maghribi women are fed, by stating:

> Another fable: that we share with all Mediterranean peoples (Jews, Christians, or Muslims) those customs and habits which constitute our originality - circumcision, the veil, the sequestering of women, marriage between cousins. Is this a fable, or is it simply replacing the events of today with ideals from the past?[52]

The second work mentioned above caused controversy and dismay among its female readers overseas who were shocked by its blatantly patronizing tone and approach, overt racism and the disdain it displayed towards Islam, Algerian men and women. In any case, it is surprising that Marnia Lazreg has not addressed the discursive and methodological continuity between these two books, apparently different, but which share similar traditional colonial representations of Algerian women, projecting them as helpless victims of a cruel misogynist world.

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51. Lazreg, 'Feminism and Difference', p. 91.

52. M'rabet, 'Tartuferies', p. 347.

For instance, Tillion describes them as the 'serfs' of the modern world. Furthermore, Lazreg was not the only Algerian female academic to discard Minces's work on the grounds of its alleged profeminist stance. Fatma Oussedik rejects its treatment of religion, arguing that 'the Koranic teaching is considered in it a mere cultural product' and is not projected as 'the teaching of a society about itself; hinged on its own economy and social structure'.[53] Looking at the social and cultural phenomena in Arab societies as being fixed, non-evolutive and ahistorical is also outlined by the critic when she declares that 'the author skips from the 14th to the 20th century without noticing any variations in the utilization of this teaching, and therefore, without explaining these variations'.[54] She further sums up the broader position of her fellow feminist academics on the work of North American and European female researchers working on subjects related to themselves and their societies as follows:

> The statements made by feminists from the countries of the centre (Europe and North America) on the lot of women in the Arab world which deprive these women of the right to express themselves in the same way that the central authorities do will not make our societies change. On the contrary, such statements are picked up and used in the framework of the anti-imperialist struggle in its cultural and ideological form.[55]

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53. Oussedik, 'To Conduct Research on Women', p. 116.

54. Oussedik, 'To Conduct Research on Women', p. 116.

55. Oussedik, 'To Conduct Research on Women', p. 116.

This is an overt assertion confirming awareness towards the colonialist bias pervading European discourses on Arab women, whether produced by male or female authors: it fundamentally agrees with the argument that establishes the allegiance of academic work undertaken by Western female writers to the legacy of largely male hegemonic discourses as they developed in disciplines such as anthropology, sociology and ethnology as well as literature and criticism. Oussedik stresses this idea and also compares the oppression of the indigenous female by her society with her subjugation as subject of study in Western authorship. She argues that 'Arab women are the subject of oppression in their own societies, and have now become subjects of study for Western feminists'.[56] And the result is that their statements are judged inadequate and defined as neo-colonial.

On the other hand, Arab feminists are equally castigated for not adopting a similar attitude to US minority women who 'have consistently challenged academic feminist projects' and 'have pointed out problem areas that feminist knowledge must address and resolve before it can claim to be an alternative to "traditional knowledge"'.[57] However, it may be safe to argue here in defense of feminists in North Africa and the Middle East that they are not assessed in comparative terms with

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56. Oussedik, 'To Conduct Research on Women', p. 117.

57. Lazreg, 'Feminism and Difference', p. 82.

other feminist writers from geographical areas outside the Western world, but to minority women in the United States. The work of African-American and other ethnic minority women in the US, in spite of its marginalized status, remains part of feminist scholarship as it developed in the West as the case is with Black British feminists in the UK. Attacking the work of White middle class feminists and scholarship at large where they are silenced and their respective societies where they are invisible becomes a crucial task in the process of defining their own identities as citizens, women and writers. The existing anti-imperialist criticism by Arab women is not delivered though in the same detailed and systematic manner as that of African-American and African-European women.

Nevertheless, a brief review of the position of Black and White British feminists during the eighties is provided in the appendix in order to point out similarities between the critical attitudes of minority women in the West and their fellow sisters from the Middle East and North Africa. The rejection of White feminist work by Black British and Afro-American women writers is briefly reviewed herein with the essential aim of reflecting the implicit critical assumptions it shares with Third World female academics as a whole. This discussion is the more important because of the cross-cultural links various feminisms are developing nowadays. And alliances are presently being forged between 'minority women' in the Western world and Third World

female writers.[58] There seems to be a consensus between the two groups over fundamental critical parameters. They occupy at least one common position: they both evolve on the Periphery of the First World, that is, they are situated, in discursive, political and historical terms, within a common subsidiary and dependent position vis-a-vis the Metropoly where White middle class female authors are located.

Significant in appraising the case of African-American and Black feminists' views is the fact that their critique is located within and beyond the confines of Western discourse: their critical perspective, in spite of its rejection of mainly White radical socialist feminism and its exclusion from it remains inscribed within and circumscribed by White Western cultural and textual tradition within which it has necessarily developed itself into a discursive mode. It therefore gives great credence and sufficient grounds to US and British minority women's double initiative to 'transform' First World feminism according to a new world view. This might erase prejudices of the past and at the same time involve them in the realm of a new feminism which, they believe, would be more representative of all women, regardless of considerations such as class, race, ethnicity or religion.

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58. For instance, Nawal El Saadawi featured prominently, at least twice, in issues of the Black British women's review, Spare Rib.

Concomitant to this view is the claim made by some female scholars in Arab countries for autonomy from the Western feminist movement as they feel outside its Eurocentered discourse and alien to its targets. However, they, too, experience a cultural, social and material reality which stems from an Arabo-Islamic tradition but is influenced today by Western models of development and modes of thought. And they themselves have been taking over Western traditions of representation which import a certain academic viewing of their role and the world. But, bearing in mind the force of anti-Orientalism to operate as a deconstructive and critical model, pan-Arab feminist academics meaningfully seek to secure autonomy and assertiveness through the 'desorientalization' of its position both inside and outside the 'Muslim East'.

Black feminists' views in the US and Europe are significant in so far as they make judgements about the inadequacy of Western feminism and its defectiveness. They consequently induce at least some White socialist feminists such as Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh to rethink the structures of their feminist theorizing.[59] However their claims to disparage White socialist feminism, like those of Third World feminists as a whole, were made very much as a result of the emergence of their own intellectualism. Nevertheless, the extent to which these critical discourses can succeed is perhaps

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59. See Appendix for a brief presentation of gender and racism.

compromised from the outset; it depends so much on the intellectual discursive framework of White feminists and their conceptual stand towards racism, ethnocentrism and neo-imperialism and their ability to grasp power differences or to disregard these issues altogether.

It is an important endeavour to question the authority which allows criticism from Euro-American circles to formulate judgements about the (in)adequacy of women's conceptions of emancipation and progress, when they are articulated outside the context of a Christian/Western tradition. There is, yet again, an implicit predicament of power, inscribed within Western feminist scholarly narrative. This raises a question: if Anglo-American and French feminisms set out to question the significance and functionality or relevancy of non-Western structures of behaviour and thought, whether spiritual, socio-cultural, aesthetic and material, this is concomitant to the existence of a power relationship between First World and Third World feminisms in broad terms, an issue that can no longer be neglected; it hampers the rise of alternative models, more adequate to respond to the needs and aspirations of women world-wide. On the other hand, the problematic location of feminism within discourses of Otherness raises another issue: that many feminist academics in the First World have remained oblivious of the origin and forms of their authority embedded in their critical apparatuses when involved in treatments of femininity and female issues outside the countries of the Centre.

So, the issues concerning this specific question are several: firstly, a growing number of White feminists in the First World are becoming aware of ethnocentrism and racism which they try to attack as well as redefining boundaries of sisterhood with the rest of 'womankind'. However, Afro-American and other minority women in the West and their counterparts elsewhere argue that mainstream Western feminist discourses reproduce them anyway. Secondly, it appears that, in both North and South, the problem is located within the development of feminist discourses as part of Western disciplinary work and their origin within dominant conceptual frameworks from which they derive their own power. So when Western Black feminist movements and pan-Arab feminism wish to transcend the racist and especially Eurocentric presuppositions of White Western feminism, they do so while they continue to use the intellectual discourse of academic work; therefore the question arises: do they really transcend the weakness which they find in White First World feminism?

10. 3. Defining the Subject of Study: the `Arab woman`

The category 'woman' as recently established by Western feminist social science, is wide, multifaceted and remains void of meaning if not adequately applied to a specific frame like that of race, ethnicity, class, history, religion, literacy, culture, education, experience, nationalism and other structuring conditions.

However, the initial wave of Western feminist work led to an unproblematized emphasis on concepts of global sisterhood and the 'universal oppression of women', overlooking in the process any particular difference between women world-wide, the cultural and material specificities shaping their lives as well as the confrontational nature of their mutual interests. In fact, the universality of the female experience was Euro-American only with perhaps some occasional and vague resemblances to the oppression of women elsewhere.

But a new critical assessment of the category 'woman' soon developed, brought about by the numerous attacks levelled by non-White feminists against the tacit claim of First World research to the universality of human experience as explained earlier. It may be argued, in this context, that female anthropologists (whether feminist or not) were among the group of scholars who responded in an early phase to charges of ethnocentrism and racism from so-called 'women of colour' and started to deal with these problems in their subsequent production.[60] Present-day charges are emanating from Third World women as well and, together with minority women in the West, they refuted the universalistic approach which marked Western scholarship, including feminist thought. In this context, one should bear in mind the importance of the anthropological involvement in research on non-Western societies. This, plus the fact

60. See the work by Henrietta L. Moore, Feminism and Anthropology (London: Polity Press, 1988).

that anthropology is conceived as inherently imbued with imperialism in view of the nature of its concerns and its origin in a Western tradition of scientific investigation about the 'Others' in the world which coincided with the voyages of discoveries, means that such a move on the part of feminist anthropologists becomes indispensable. It is valid insofar as it is crucial to the future of anthropology and ethnological research and to the adequacy of its discourse. However, it should also be mentioned that not all First World feminists have become aware of the problem of ethnocentrism and racism and other significant differences between them and women from less privileged backgrounds whether inside their own countries or from foreign lands. Therefore the criticisms related to Eurocentrism, racism or even of class bias continue to be significant and perhaps, more outstandingly so, in the present age, marked by huge differences, notably in terms of access to resources and distribution of wealth and power between all nations and nationally between various groups. In a similar vein, feminists developed their own criticism of Western feminist representational and analytical frames and in so doing supplemented the available discursive approaches to post-imperialist and the new anti-Orientalist rhetoric with gendered readings. This phenomenon underlines the changes in the self-image and self-confidence of certain Arabs and Muslims, more notoriously well educated women. So, in spite of the general grounds on which most of the assumptions of this debate are based, there is diversity

in the various categories of Arab/Muslim womanhood as there is also no univocal feminist voice. There is a kind of unity in the multiformity of women's experiences of subordination, resistance or conservatism across the barriers of class, history, nationality and upbringing, which may justify the adoption of the wide label of 'Arab woman' in the present study. This, however, should in no way be interpreted as an attempt at homogenization of women throughout the region.

Having stressed the inadequacy of terms like the 'Arab woman', to reflect in a single monolithic frame the various lifestyles and experiences of women from Maghreb and Machrek, the analysis of scholarly work by women on gender and its interaction with social, cultural and political conditions, undertaken in previous parts, should be relocated accordingly.

The definition of the 'Arab woman' as a subject of study is apprehended as a twofold phenomenon: firstly as a construction or a creation of a dominant First World intellectual discourse; the 'Oriental female' was one textual/sexual instance of this interaction of history with gender, male desire and power in an earlier phase of coloniality and the 'Third World woman' or even the 'Arab woman' may be productions of a later stage, that of neo-imperialism and of the New World Order'. In this context, one can speak for instance of the colonization of the Algerian woman (or any woman from the region under study) by Western female academics who have invaded and appropriated their academic space and spoke on their

behalf in a consistent manner, for the last two centuries at least.[61] Then, there is the case of the indigenous Orientalizing of women. It is a delivery of the 'Arab woman', vested this time in communal structures and the discursive activity they produce and which consign the boundaries of womanliness to esoteric and practical notions, shifting between theological and physiological values, that is, between images of women as believers and mothers, spiritual and a-sexual. In other words, so far the category 'woman' can be examined using the approach developed by Said to criticize the Orientalist practice while concentrating on the historical and theoretical issues which that approach has posed. An example was provided by Cemil Schick's analysis which foregrounded this Orientalist construction of the specifically 'Muslim woman' as Oriental or 'Levantine' using in the process Rana Kabbani's exploration of the 'eroticisation' of colonialism and the 'feminisation' of the Orient as framework for those representations. On the other hand, other critical perspectives, not mutually exclusive but complementary, stress one common denominator, the projection of the metaphor of the veiled woman. Here female identity is equated with the irrational, the spiritual and the cryptic, values embedded in her definition as believer or religious. This array of discursive appropriations of women's identities are ultimately forging the subject of scholarly interest in

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61. A predicament also put forward by Marnia Lazreg.

the social sciences, fiction, historical studies as well as the more folkloric subject of popular curiosity and even entertainment to be principally conveyed by the medias. All the while, the messages cross-refer to each other and draw extra sustenance and conformity in contrast to a more tangible, central model, that of the White Western female who appears, in view of the ideological dimension underpinning this global process of differentiation and identification, the 'external standard deemed to be perfect'.[62]

There is yet another process, identified in the writing of the 'Eastern female', this time as author, that is, endowed with some of the power - mainly academic - which served so far only to alienate her, restrict her place and role in the world and impose on her the identities that best reflect the interests of a dominant group, whether this interest is pure yearning for power and control or material and political. The female author, endowed with this new authority, partly acquired from the Western academic practice, escapes the patriarchal, Orientalist or neo-imperialist mode of discourse. But the immediate concern is to attempt a location of women within indigenous structures and the historical developments of a post-colonial society and state.

The scission, symbolic and physical, endured by some societies in the region - Algeria and Egypt are notable

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62. Lazreg, 'Feminism and Difference', p. 5.

examples - during the last decade, manifests itself in the way women's images have assumed new meanings against the background of acute political and socio-economic crises. Women too have been split along the lines of the current confrontation between religious fundamentalists in the party FIS[63] which led to the resurgence of a strong Islamic identity, and the state. Women were urged by male religious extremists to return to confinement, through the *hejab* and the adoption of 'pure' Islamic values. This call was acknowledged and endorsed by many women, across barriers of class, literacy, education and other backgrounds (although many were already living in more conservative and economically constrained environments). A woman who wears the *hejab*, commonly called the *mutahajibat* thus distinguishes herself plainly not only from men and their world but also from the non-*Mutahajibates*. It is interesting, at this juncture, to illustrate the study with the in-depth analysis of Egypt provided by Margot Badran. Similar developments occurred there, because as she writes, 'in Egypt, the 'woman question' has been a contested domain involving feminists, Islamists and the state'.[64] A significant point she makes is the divisive effect which politics

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63. FIS stands for 'Front Islamique du Salut' but the letters together also give the sound for the word 'fils' (son), which indicates, at the semiotic level at least, the patriarchal focus existing in the party's ideology.

64. See the analytical study by Margot Badran, 'Competing Agenda: Feminists, Islam and the State in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Egypt', in Women, Islam and the State, ed. by Kandiyoti, p. 201-236.

had on women in this century. It is interesting to notice the similarity between the various discourses on women throughout Egypt's history and present-day cases from other countries in the Middle East. For instance, the following quote could equally describe present-day confrontations opposing the religious orthodoxy and feminist forces in North Africa, and, following more recent events in Egypt, extreme tensions between the various political factions (similar to Algeria, Tunisia), women again locate themselves within the ideological trends which, they believe, serve their interests best:

> [the 'woman question'] has been a question through which the state, the religious establishment and Islamic movements have projected other designs. Women themselves helped to formulate the question on their own terms both as feminists and as actors in Islamic movements. While as feminists they generated their own terms of debate and as Islamists they mainly reproduced male discourses, as actors in everyday life, both assumed new roles, and in so doing gave further definition to the question.[65]

She goes to say:

> While there has been always room in Egypt for alternative positions on the 'woman question' - with the state, Islamists, and feminists all keeping it alive, - only feminists, for whom the 'woman question' is central, have meaningfully attacked patriarchal interests and opposed male supremacy.[66]

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65. Badran, 'Competing Agenda' in Women, Islam and the State, p. 201.

66. Badran, 'Competing Agenda', p. 228.

In contrast, the secular female becomes this 'Other' woman whose morality, faith and nationalism are constantly questioned and, as a consequence, the burden of proof falls on her shoulders alone. She thus tends to give her support to the political groups and currents demanding democratic and secular reforms.

This division of women has led to a polarization of femininity into religious and secular identities. The crisis also split their respective agendas, which led to different forms of struggle and ways of experiencing gender. Female Islamists have become apparently representative of good womanhood, one which is culturally recognizable and universally acceptable (even by the so-called democrats), in other words the 'unapproachable referent' of Algerian womanhood. On the other hand, there is the more 'secular' female conveying a more ambiguous and controversial image of femaleness, one which is, particularly in the eyes of rural communities, promptly associated with betrayal because it is seen as somehow 'perverted' or 'Westernized. And in the case of the latter female, the new feminist activist or secular intellectual, some power was gained partly by virtue of the fact that she is the ambiguous female who appropriates academic and phallocentric discourse from the Eurocentric world. Hence she was/is no longer the 'Arab woman' as such. In these crucial terms is raised the issue of her loyalty to her cultural heritage and to Arabo-Islamic identity.

As a result, there is a sharpening of sexual segregation and a hardening of male positions in what seem apparently to be new battles around religious or secular identities. While there seems to be no resistance to patriarchal values on the part of the *mutahajibates* or female Islamists, secular women, especially those who are educated and professionally skilled, criticize it constantly. For the latter, the feminist agenda enforces several targets of struggle which encompass political conditions of liberation and a redefinition of democracy. To be sexually freed from the shackles of tradition and religion is also becoming increasingly part of their overall agenda. However, this issue raises particular problems. The case of women seeking liberation through an appropriation of the body as the review of feminist fiction in chapter five tried to demonstrate, becomes fraught with dilemmas in view of the pervasive machismo culture, heightened by religious fundamentalism, the loosening of the social fabric and the spread of poverty. Soumaya Naamane-Guessous, who explores the tensions undergone by another nation from the Maghreb, Morocco, demonstrates through her work, the effects of the social crisis on the liberation of women in that country from this angle: her work is mostly concerned with an investigation of the sexual mores imposed on women from a range of various backgrounds, although she also highlights the impact which difficult conditions of living and poverty have in reinforcing the subordination of women. She shows how women who try to

live out their sexuality do not always succeed in their bid for self-fulfilment as they often fall victim to male exploitation. Because of financial hardship, some young women drift into a form of prostitution, whereby they go out with one or several partners on a regular basis and, in exchange for their bodies, they receive gifts and small amounts of money. Such forms of sexual union are interpreted as signs of the alienation of women, although the author stresses the cause as stemming from approaches to modernity. Indirectly, women find themselves coerced into sex in the name of such modernity, otherwise they are treated with contempt and then abandoned. Their sexual exploitation is in that sense unresolved by modernity because of the prevailing material and social conditions which make men more dominant than ever and an anachronism at the level of conceptions of gender roles which are disintegrating without offering sound alternatives. Moreover, the persistence of outdated conceptions of femininity, honour and sex roles within the domestic ideology is problematic as argued in chapter seven. But it is women who become victimized by the overall confusion. So this period is marked by hypocrisy and ambiguities.

Similarly, Mernissi underlines the hypocrisy inherent in male-female relationships, fraught with the ambiguities experienced by society at large. Mernissi sees the social strains and frustrations in terms of an essential conflict between tradition and modernity, the former eliciting unprompted reactions, namely seeking

refuge in the past, whilst the latter calls forth a move towards the future. The antagonism between notions of past and present or tradition and modernity is therefore born, in a way, out of the consequent irreconcilable links between ideology and a reality, expressed already in her theory as an essential anachronism between superstructure and infrastructure. But whatever political conflicts and social developments within which women have to operate in the areas concerned, they are projected by feminist academic representations, in spite of the divisions between them due to different religious, cultural, ethnic and national conditions, as 'neither homogeneous nor passive victims of patriarchal domination'.[67] Kandiyoti thus defines them as 'full-fledged social actors, bearing the full set of contradictions implied by their class, racial and ethnic locations as well as their gender'.[68]

The framework traditionalism versus modernism generates discrepancies of such order for women. However its implications for the movement of female emancipation and images of women released by the advent of the clash between fundamentalism and feminism (mainly in the last decade), are significant at a deeper level of perception and (self)representation and therefore deserve further study. Although related to the sub-conscious, these images are part of the present attempt at defining women

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67. Kandiyoti, 'Introduction', p. 17.

68. Kandiyoti, 'Introduction', p. 17.

and the shifting boundaries of their identities and of their relations with patriarchy.

10. 4. Paradoxes of Gender Representations

Feminist historicized work on images of women in relation to the production of femininity in the Arabo-Islamic discourse is significant in the assessment of the woman's movement in the post-modern era and the understanding of the new pressures and challenges facing the Arab woman striving for change, who, in the course of establishing her power and freedom, revives the image of the female 'omnisexuality'. It is already apparent nowadays, that the concept of the mistress as 'anti-wife' or the '*femme-vagin*' as Naamane-Guessous more explicitly terms her, focuses on the notion of female sexual deviousness and unquenchable lust, namely of the female as 'voracious-crack' or her corollary, Aicha.

Once relocated in its ethno-historical context, present day's male binary approach to women as either bad and lustful, that is, analogized as a 'vagina', or on the other hand good and chaste, that is, analogized as a 'womb' derives from these much older and deeper perceptions. There is nevertheless a contrast with earlier views, in the sense that the implicit/unconscious method and the explicit/conscious process were embodied by a global concept of femininity whereas a split had occurred today in this overall outlook, releasing images of the unconscious which are conveyed by the model of the

mistress, the prostitute and simply by assertive women. Thereafter, it is worth plumbing the negative implications that this debate holds for the issue of liberation for the emancipated female tends to arouse fears and distrust in society, in other words, the question of her cultural integrity and political or nationalist allegiance are recurrently addressed.

Because of the colonial setting of the early attempts at unveiling indigenous females, negative attributes and phallicized perceptions have become attached nowadays to the women's movement. A link between discourses on women and the family soon became tied up to the idea of cultural imperialism. The associations between feminism and neo-imperialism remain the subject of an ongoing debate within the societies of the Arab region and were polarized during the eighties by the confrontation between Islamists and secular feminists, the former accusing the latter of being the instrument of Western capitalism and its neo-colonial designs and for wanting to corrupt and destroy the Arabo-Muslim family. It is interesting to note that Abbas Madani, the leader of the Algerian fundamentalist FIS, disbanded in 1992, used to speak in these terms about the members of feminist associations whom he called 'éperviers du colonialisme'.

In the light of this discussion, Sabbah appropriately argues that 'femaleness [...] is erosion, the levelling of social hierarchies. Femaleness can only

assert itself by and through subversion',[69] in other words by bringing about a total transformation of the social order and addressing sexual asymmetry. Recent feminist demands in many countries to abolish *shari'a* law from the regulation of civil life appears as a frightening prospect and a truly radical endeavour to conservative groupings and adds to the association of feminism with destruction and subversion. It ensues that undermining subordination is translated as insubordination. Hence, the insidious, irrevocable link between various images of womanhood buried in the recesses of the Arab unconscious. The collective imagination equates socio-economic change with an alteration of old, sacrosanct symbolic boundaries. The omniscient rule of the Father is challenged by the sexual freedom of the daughter. At a metaphorical level, the subversive implication of the omnisexual female has been revived by today's feminist and her claim for sexual and social liberation. Sabbah argues that 'the criteria that govern the choice of the woman voracious-crack and those of the *wali* [the father or legal representative], who is the representative and guarantor of the Muslim order, can only clash with each other'.[70] The transgressive values conspicuously conveyed by the protofeminist in the context of Arabo-Islamism are read in her comment:

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69. Sabbah, Muslim Unconscious, p. 35.

70. Sabbah, Muslim Unconscious, p. 35.

> The criteria that govern the omnisexual's choice can be nothing but a constant source of subversion of the Muslim family. Even more serious is the fact that this source of subversion is endogenous, from within. It is violently intimate, insidiously, tenderly, internal to the Muslim family. One imagine the mental manoeuvres, so tempting, so easy, which links subversion and femaleness in the shadowy depths of the collective memory.[71]

Fatna Sabbah reflects on the question of female subversion of the social order projected by feminism or female independence. She discusses the impact of cultural images of women on present day feminist struggles for the liberation of women from the shackles of the past:

> One can imagine the ease with which this link [between femaleness and subversion] crops up in the present-day crises that the male believer experiences in a society constantly desecrated and assailed from the outside by technology and its masters, and from the inside by the collapse of social hierarchies and the rapid spread of egalitarian ideas.[72]

Most feminist writers depict the fear of women as traitor, as conveyed for instance by Aicha Kandicha freed from the collective unconscious, the 'Aicha-*Rajal*' of today or liberated women or the female of pagan Arabia or the pre-monotheistic era when female sexuality was apparently free and unbound by human and divine laws. Sabbah articulates this implied relationship between

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71. Sabbah, Muslim Unconscious, p. 35.

72. Sabbah, Muslim Unconscious, p. 35.

women, the fear of omnisexuality and the pre-Islamic order in these terms:

> She emerges from all that has been forgotten, rejected, repressed, forbidden; from the pre-monotheistic, pre-Islamic period, the era of barbarism, *al-jahiliya*, the era of no limits, of no thresholds, of goddesses, when the identity of a child was determined by its maternal origin, the vagina from which it emerged, and not by a fiction, a law - that is, paternity.[73]

A similar link between revolutionary models of womanhood embodied by the omnisexual woman, the *Jahiliya* female and the 'new woman' is further established by Mernissi:

> In modern Muslim societies, women who seek university degrees and jobs and who invest a large part of their energies in strictly individualist aspirations conjure in a whole inventory of symbolic images, the ghosts of women of the pre-Islamic Arab aristocracy.[74]

Whatever the reading applied to past or present male uneasiness towards women, revealed by erotic fantasies and Arabo-Islamic writing at large, it remains possible to assert that these feelings are conducive to an image of womanhood as radical and disruptive. Hence one can understand better the impact of the fear and mistrust which feminists today are able to strike in the heart and mind of the male believer for whom the past - an inextricable part of his 'present' - and its associations are not completely buried and resolved; these

73. Sabbah, Muslim Unconscious, p. 26.

74. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 85.

associations relating modern independent women to their *Jahiliya* sisters on one hand, feminists struggle for sexual liberation, among other things, to the demands of the 'voracious-crack' female on the other. At last, this image of womanliness, commonly depicted by feminist literature, is further explored by Mernissi from the viewpoint of Arabo-Islamic civilization which sees woman as 'the epitome of the uncontrollable, a living representative of the dangers of sexuality and its rampant disruptive potential'.[75] She then explains the implication of these associations between femininity, sexuality, betrayal, feminism, paternity and archetypal notions of the feminine principle embodied in the *Jahiliya* woman and her counterparts, the ogress, the 'voracious-crack', even the alien colonial female, etc...

She thus recalls:

> The idea of female sexual self-determination which is suggested by the term 'women's liberation' is likely to stir ancestral fears of this mythical (pre-civilized) *Jahiliya* woman before whom the male is deprived of all initiative, control and privilege. [...] They [men] are badly equipped to deal with a self-determined woman; hence the repulsion and fear that accompany the idea of women's liberation.[76]

This indicates other motives for the hostility towards female emancipation. Fear drives men to look back to a remote ancestral past (like the male characters of the

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75. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 44.

76. Mernissi, Beyond the Veil, p. 166.

'revolutionary' novel Nedjma) with some nostalgia and becomes translated in a need to find refuge in an allegedly ideal age.

In the light of this argument, one can appreciate more fully the more contemporary pressures exerted by religious militants against women to abdicate their freedom and repudiate the notion of emancipation, first by covering their body whose erotic display can induce the much hated social fear of *fitna* or disarray. This fear can, however, translate a more profound reality, crushing the 'eternal feminine' by principally erasing the female body, the seat of *ora* and sexual desire and the physical sign of difference. The strategy of Islamic fundamentalist extremists aims at reviving the sexual division/anomie of society as the best safeguard against the evil power of women and to protect a collective identity imperiled by various onslaughts, mainly articulated through Western material and cultural imperialism and the new freedom of women.

The popular imagination weaves constant threads between a present which it rejects and a past which it glorifies. The revolutionary force of the women's movement in the Muslim East at large, backed up by the multiform, daily struggle by countless women, lies incidentally in its subversive stance towards this notion of history and its strive, in spite of disheartening obstacles, to drag society ahead towards a more humane future.

AFTERWARDS

One problem encountered by the present work has been the classification of the material studied as feminist literature, that is, whether the term 'feminist' should apply to works which do not explicitly use a typically feminist critical methodology. It has been assumed, however, that they all share common concerns about the subordination of women in their respective societies. Furthermore, they all speak with a strong critical self and agree on the need for an evaluation of research on women and for more analytical writings on gender within the various disciplines. Their investigation of the position of women reflects the concerns of a great majority of their fellow sisters. So, broadly speaking, most of these texts have been approached as 'feminist' in view of their critical insight and varying degrees of awareness regarding the status of women and the need to deconstruct dominant institutions, discourses, familial organization, social patterns as well as addressing the rise of religious fundamentalism. They are all animated by a will to improve the state of research on women in the region under study, although they are not always self-aware of their internal limitations in terms of methodology and discourse.

While engaging with this kind of global assessment of feminisms, this thesis has endeavoured to trace their general parameters and offer a broad conceptual framework as well. Emphasis has been placed on a limited number of writers and works because of the scope of the thesis, though effort has been made to highlight the current and 'classical' aspects of feminist literature.[1] This has required discussing apparently unrelated interests such as sexuality and politics but which, it has been suggested, can be seen as interacting intimately through male discursive fields (whether fictional, cultural or religious and political) which attempt to codify the private and public behaviour of women and delineate their role as mothers or wives, workers and citizens. Moreover, the sexual and political articulations of feminist demands constitute the basis of any emancipatory effort and have equally marked the women's movement in the First World. Women have responded by trying to adapt to the prevailing order, to resist it or to transform it. Women critics have managed to provide an increasingly coherent and efficient challenge to the phallocracies in place in spite of many problems, the internal conflicts of such a criticism and the lack of institutional acknowledgement and critical interest that their work is

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1. More works on the topic of women in North Africa and the Middle East have been published in the course of 1992. Although I am aware of some of these writings, I have been unable to take them on board because of constraints of time and other conditions.

met with from Arab and foreign intellectual and political circles.

Part One drew the general context of dominant discourse, establishing the principle that there is this 'male voice' disseminated, taken on by males and females. This was specified by the case study of Algeria at a time when one would anticipate changes in dominant discourse, so an analysis of how that did not happen in a radical context motivated the presentation of the example in question. This presentation was subsequently broadened by reference to literary culture, through an extreme case again, that of a writer Kateb Yacine writing in many respects against dominant discourse. But the overall conclusion highlighted the force of patriarchal ideology and the deep embeddednesss of its discourse. In Part Two, it was shown how a feminist voice has established itself in the context set out hitherto. Some of the long-term forms of the 'voice' of the 'Other' were indicated and some modern women who are emerging with a new 'power' as authors were identified. Although this power remains limited, it is not to be ignored. But it is assumed that the feminist discussions assessed in Part Two also highlight the unresolved problems within the textual discourse of women writers writing about women. Beyond the novel and its framing of the 'new woman', academic discourse pointed out textual appropriations by women of other fields, the sexual and the political. Both fields of debate and interpretation articulated a feminism dealing with the position of women and with the

multifaceted aspects of their oppression. In Part Three, the focus is on displacing the dominant discourse, beyond the first (and second) waves of feminism from a theoretical viewpoint in a context of material and spiritual crises. The debates reviewed so far in the last Part also indicate, on a broad basis, the existence of dominant discourses - originating inside and beyond the region studied here - in the definition of women and their position within socio-cultural systems and in international networks of power relations.

The focus of the thesis as a whole seems to lie, however, in the development of a feminist criticism which was the object of the chapters dealing with fiction, sexuality and politics in the second part. These discussions highlighted crucial issues with regard the subordination of women and their emancipation, mainly that the subversion running through the literary history of women appears as a constant parameter of their overall resistance and attempts at forging voices and does not stem solely from the subsequent radicalization of feminism. Fiction by women is breaking new ground with female representations and self-representations and therefore fosters a hope or foreshadows a new future, that of a true liberation outside the world of fiction, not only for women but also for their societies as a whole. Consequently, it is interesting to note that post-colonial battles between tradition and subversion as already mirrored by fiction have engineered, in the last decade, more clearly defined and ideologically oriented

struggles between modernity and tradition and between egalitarian and authoritarian tendencies or secular feminism and neo-patriarchy. Therefore, these conflicts tend to stand as a metonimy for various frameworks of unequal conflicts between domination and subordination, whether gender based or historical, such as the classification born of colonization, between colonizer and colonized. The gendered reading of history is again adequate to render the 'women question' and its implications and vice-versa.

Moreover, the chapters mentioned above set out to explore the deconstruction of male/misogynist discourses by post-colonial feminist narratives and the subsequent transformation of the apparently passive female subject fashioned by the former into the disruptive subject discovered by the latter in its investigation of the unconscious. However, it was argued that this model of womanhood was not confined to the symbolic order which it transcended in a later stage to embody the more radical and politicized voices of modern feminism. The transgressive values identified with the production of femininity by the collective unconscious or what Mernissi identifies as the latent ideology of female sexuality become endorsed, at the practical level, by the 'new woman'. in other words, explicit and implicit statements are inferred in probing the implications of dominant discourses.

This feminist subject is read as a new critical voice in Arab societies and feminism as a new subversive

force, bearer of change which, stemming from the margins, slowly pushes ahead in order to invest the social and intellectual field or mainstream. This suggests a dual reading of the feminine principle within popular consciousness, determined by political and psycho-analytical interpretations.

In view of all the hostile reminiscences she brings about,[2] the protofeminist woman becomes, like the 'ominisexual' female discovered by Fatna Sabbah, the epitomized manifestation of the unconscious and it is only in that realm that she is allowed to function. Translated metaphorically, the resistance of the Eastern male to female emancipation is to be read as an outcome of the determined attempt by the Arab mother, a woman in her own right at last, to sever the resilient umbilical cord with the son. However, this separation between mother and son is unilateral as the latter has not yet resolved the dilemma of his relationship of attraction for maternal warmth and fear of the mother/ogress. He has not outgrown the consuming love of the Mother as her devouring passion remains a promise and guaranty of his return to the gynecum, entailed at a deeper level by his entrance into the belly of the *ghoula*, that is, the Archetypal Mother. Thus it may be argued that the immoderate female figure of the 'woman-as-voracious-crack',[3] may be read as the highest, extravagant

2. These were presented in the final section of the thesis, under the title 'Paradoxes of Gender Representations'.

3. See the study of this category of femininity described by Sabbah in chapter six.

embodiment of this archetype of the Devouring Mother which apparently still haunts the Arab collective unconscious. This process symbolizes in turn the desire to return to the past, to the origins, an interpretive process already exemplified by the novel Nedjma and at a more theoretical level, by the 'ahistoricity complex' suffered by Arabo-Muslim psyche as discussed by Mernissi.[4] The drive for death entailed by such an oneiric process and the nostalgia it nourishes towards the so-called Golden Age of Islamic civilization, a restoration of history demanded by fundamentalists today, tend to reinforce the main thesis here.

In the light of the present argument, feminism appears potentially disruptive as it aims at breaking the traditional bond between mother and son and free women from the binding and restrictive role of motherhood as defined in a patriarchal society. The development of narrative strategies by women novelists appropriately rendered this process: these have shown a growing tendency to part with a conventional and outdated figure of woman as mother, in contrast to a different process noted in the criticism of male literature as it persists in nurturing or dwelling over passive images of motherhood and sacrificial maternal love. The feminist

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4. Bouhdiba renders this process adequately through the narration of a legend, that of Jubair who is required to undress his mother in order to attain his objective - and truth - but cannot do so. He is then deceived by female figure who looks like his mother but is only a shadow, a spirit. The author translates this as the inability of the male to demystify the mother and see her 'in the flesh'.

is thus perceived at the deepest level of the social, cultural unconscious, as the 'corrupt' female or the disloyal and 'bad' mother. Hence the fear that feminism threatens to destructure the family and dismantle patriarchy.

The interest in the association of femininity with change or subversion is also of a political order mainly because subversion is the act, the intent or conspiracy to destroy the prevailing Law and ideological arrangement, in this case a phallocratic and theocratic system. Male resistance to female emancipation, perceived in terms of rupture (departure from an 'authentic' identity), disruption and erosion, is interpreted here in historical, ideological and psycho-analytical terms. This reflects some of the implications conveyed by the meaning of feminism.

The situation becomes inextricably complex with the advent of profound relentless changes at the level of civil, social and economic life. Replaced within a broader international context, that of the power relationships between nations of the affluent North and those, much poorer of the developing world, the negative connotations attached to feminism deepen. The imbalance of these relations explains the persistence of the symbolic complex of castration prevalent in the dominated world as discussed in Part One. This in turn engenders a backlash against any attempt by women to work for gender equality and the remodelling of spatial boundaries, even if their emancipatory effort addresses the problem of

domination as a more global phenomenon. It is thus interesting to note that some continuity is suggested here, about the development of debates on femininity and feminism from the psycho-analytical to the political.

It is noteworthy that theories of female oppression have developed, whereby the political dimension of the 'women question' is coming to the forefront of criticism. Nevertheless, more research is still needed with regard the crucial relationships between women and the post-colonial state. The features of post-colonial feminist commitments have led to research into the implications of broad movements such as the internationalization of Western economic liberalism, fascism and neo-imperialism for the position of women. These concerns may also underline the contrast existing between practices of feminism in East and West or North and South and the prioritization of goals of struggle in each of these regions.

Notably, economic liberalization and democratization are the most significant changes brought into national settings in the last decade and are rapidly shaping a new reality for the developing world at large as well as raising questions about how women are affected by the transformations taking place. Although there is a substantial body of literature on women and the state, the role of the latter needs to be further theorised to show how the emergent ideologies and the changing institutional practices are affecting the position of women in each specific case. This will highlight the way

gender correlates to political designs, programmes of development and aid and to the workings of the international market and conversely - as demonstrated here - the way traditional ideologies of morality and sexuality inform the modernist discourse of politics and economics. Therefore, the focus of any further research will be the position of women as shaped by radical changes, new challenges and struggles around wide geo-political interests and movements, especially liberalism, developmentalism, secularism, democratization and Islamification. Finally, this will underline women's own political resistance to the overall designs of the developmental state and the terms of their liberation and survival in particularly difficult national and international contexts. However, the feminist agenda is constantly thwarted by political set-backs and the movements for female emancipation are hampered by the overall transformations, mainly because the sexual politics of the developmental state are increasingly manipulated, influenced or curbed by other forces, those of international capitalism, Islamic fundamentalism, neo-patriarchy and imperialism. This of course has a direct bearing on the status of women. Moreover, recent political events, such as the Gulf war and the emergence of ascendent religious groups and parties, especially the terrorist activity it spawned in Algeria and Egypt, which have all contributed to the growing destabilization of the region, have divided women further, pushing them to re-align themselves with male interests, whether

motivated by spiritual, class, nationalist, anti-imperialist or pro-democratic reasons. This is of major concern for the women's movement in North Africa and the Middle East.

The urgency noted in the issue of women and the state raises another question regarding the next stages of feminist struggle in North Africa and the Middle East at large: narrowing the gap between its praxis and theory, in other words, reflecting at a pragmatic level its ideas and transforming into reality its formulations about the position of women in patriarchal societies where, for some at least, material or political pressures are so paramount that they are still perceived as the most enslaving factors. Haleh Afshar has raised this question, when she argues for the need for women scholars to grapple more realistically and efficiently with the problematic world of women, especially of those who are situated at the bottom of the scale of material welfare. She argues that 'it is time to abandon the ivory towers and even the highflown, powerful general theories and to come down to the slums and villages and help to find appropriate solutions for localised problems'.[5]

Perhaps the final word in this thesis should be the 'song of freedom'[6] sung by a Palestinian woman, the poet Fadwa Tuqan who reminds us of the plight of women

5. Haleh Afshar, Women in the Middle East: Realities, Struggles and Hopes (London: MacMillan, 1993).

6. This poem by Fadwa Tuqan appeared in The Arab Cultural Scene, ed. by Cecil Hourani (London: Namara Press, 1982); this publication is based on a special issue of The Literary Review.

struggling for the liberation of themselves and their community, highlighting the many levels of the fight for equality and freedom. Their specific case shows that nationalism can, yet again, be mediated, be feminism and that woman as a revolutionary subject is a 'liberator'. In this song, one can capture, in spite of all the pessimism, the spirit of hope and resistance that should animate any feminist and political project. Let us share in that spirit:

I have found it!
Blow ye storms,
Ye clouds on high
Cover the face of the sky!
Roll on, O ye days,
Pitch black or ablaze,
My lights will not fade out
All the night shadows that shrouded my life
Night after night,
Gone are they all, buried in the abyss of the past,
When my soul found my soul!

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APPENDIX

The Debate on Race and Gender in the West: Some Preliminary Remarks

Black feminists in Britain1 and the United States have challenged White socialist feminism on the grounds of its failure to tackle issues of racism and ethnocentrism, arguing that:

> White, mainstream feminist theory, be it from the socialist or radical feminist perspective, does not speak to the experience of Black women, and where it attempts to do so, it is often from a racist perspective and reasoning.[2]

Euro-American Black feminists are therefore inviting White feminists to help give feminism a new direction that would take into consideration women from all strata of society, from different ethnic and sexual groups. What is being asked for is a more fundamental critical reappraisal of the theories and practices feminism has elaborated and established as legitimate through what Valerie Amos and Prahtiba Parmar call an 'unconscious

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1. Black refers here to ethnic-minority women of African, Afro-Carribean and Asian descent.

2. Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar, 'Challenging Imperial Feminism', *Feminist Review*, (Autumn 1984), p 4.

consensus'.[3] This would also entail challenging White Western feminism on the basis of its alleged universality through the disestablishment of its Eurocentric categories. One example of this would be Amos and Parmar's response to Western feminist views on arranged marriages and their sweeping assumption that the Western 'romantic marriage' is the adequate category:

> Many White feminists have argued that as feminists they find it very difficult to accept arranged marriages which they see as reactionary. Our argument is that it is not up to them to accept or reject arranged marriages but up to us to challenge, accept, or reform, depending on our various perspectives, on our own culturally specific ways.[4]

The term 'feminism' as a discourse has gained, in universal terms, a European historical precedence and a position of power in terms of race, so it reflects a Western middle class gender reality that does not speak to the experience of all women. Hence the attempts of African-American feminists to push White feminism towards a re-assessment of its theories and activities, and towards issues that have also practical relevance to Third World women.

Kum Kum Bhavnani and Margaret Coulson see 'the challenge of the charge of racism as having the potential

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3. Amos and Parmar, 'Imperial Feminism', p. 4

4. Amos and Parmar, 'Imperial Feminism', p. 15.

to motivate a different kind of socialist-feminism',[5] and so to bring about the 'transformation' of feminism within the limits of sisterhood with White feminists - limits that are still to be defined. But although there exists a Black struggle which is independent in its form and content from mainstream White feminism, it seems that Black feminists are trying nonetheless to involve White feminists in a new reading of their theoretical categories in the light of the anti-imperialist and anti-racist criteria. And by doing so, they would seem - in spite of their claim to the contrary - to be seeking an inclusion within mainstream feminism in which their voices have been unheard so far.

These considerations become more significant in the light of feminists' demands elsewhere, outside the Western world. The area of discussion for pan-Arab feminism contrasts with that of Black feminism in the First World in the sense that it somehow differs in its background and aims and seeks autonomy and independence of thought and action from Western feminism. To what extent this is practically achieved and to what degree it is feasible and empirically probable remains to be seen.

However our concern here as regards Black feminism stems from an interest in a non-White movement of women's

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5. Kum-Kum Bhavnani and Margaret Coulson, 'Transforming Socialist-Feminism: the Challenge of Racism', *Feminist Review*, no. 23 (Summer 1986), p. 81-91.

emancipation and struggle which, in the present stage, is offering perhaps the most powerful and coherently meaningful challenge to the Eurocentrism of Western feminist thought and to the gaps inhering in its discourse. By attempting to assess Euro-American theory and practice, Black consciousness reveals a general trend, that of uncovering the imperialism embedded in the discourses about Third world people and consequently incites First World feminists to transcend their intellectual self-centred debates to enter the arena of political struggle. Amos and Parmar address cases of imperialist evaluation in the works of some European feminists, especially those who assume that imperialism was progressive for the Third world, particularly where it led (another wrong assumption) to capitalism:

> When Black and Third World women are being told that imperialism is good for us, it should be of no great surprise to anyone when we reject a feminism which uses Western social and economic systems to judge and make pronouncements about how Third world women can become emancipated.[6]

They add:

> Feminist theories which examine our cultural practices as 'feudal residues' or label us 'traditional' also portray us as politically immature women who need to be versed and schooled in the ethos of Western feminism. They need to be continually challenged, exposed

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6. Amos and parmar, 'Imperial Feminism', p. 7.

> for their racism and denied any legitimacy as authentic feminists.[7]

So far, the notion of Black feminism has been broadly used to refer to the movement of African-American women and 'women of colour' in the US and Britain with occasional links made with women of the Third World However as well as throwing some light on the multidimensional women's struggle in the West today, this incursion into the arena of Black feminism may serve as an indirect contribution to the understanding of the relationship between Western and Arab feminist discourses. These are also some of the contradictions inherent in any discourse aiming at changing power relations. Some White socialist feminists like Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh have counteracted this critical trend by elaborating further on the issue of White feminist women:

> Most of these White feminist writers are middle class intellectual women who are immersed in specifically British traditions of education and political thought, largely left and libertarian. Most of them, however disadvantaged they may feel as women have immense privileges in terms of race and class, which give them access to publishing, public meetings of various kinds.[8]

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7 Amos and Parmar, 'Imperial Feminism', p. 7.

8. Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh, 'Ethnocentrism and Socialist-Feminist Theory', *Feminist Review*, no. 20 (Summer 1985), pp. 21-47.

Black feminists have been thus usefully requestioning what Amos and Parmar called 'imperial feminism' and what may be, considering the added folkloric vision bestowed on women in the Arab region by Orientalism and colonialism, may be referred to as 'Orientalist feminism'.

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